

The House of the Angel



Beatriz
Guido

THE HOUSE OF THE ANGEL

Aristocratic Buenos Aires society during the nineteen twenties—what a strange, tragic and poetic setting it provides for this story. Ana Castro is a young girl living in a seclusion almost incredible to her British contemporaries. Her family's house, the House of the Angel, is her world. It is disturbed by a fierce but suppressed conflict between her remote and worldly father and her narrowly religious mother and by the secret turbulence of Ana's own emotions as she develops from child to woman. Into the House of the Angel comes a stranger, Pablo Aguirre, a young member of her father's political party. He is to fight a duel in the garden. Even before she has met him, Ana makes Pablo the focus of her imagination and her passion, and the day and the night of the duel, when she discovers the reality for which she has been searching and which proves so violently different from her dream, provide the climax of the story.

Beatriz Guido

THE HOUSE OF

THE NGEL

*Translated from the Spanish
by Joan Coyne MacLean*



ANDRE DEUTSCH



To my father,

and

**To C. D. de G. and the inhabitants
of the House of the Angel who permitted
Ana Castro to live in it
once upon a time**

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*"In an old house, there is always listening,
And more is heard than is spoken.
And what is spoken remains in the room,
Waiting for the future to hear it."*

T. S. Eliot THE FAMILY REUNION



he time has come to serve the coffee. I linger over my dessert, trying to hold back the moment. I shall have to get up, pour it myself, and go to him to offer him that porcelain demitasse which never, during all these years, has failed to tremble in my hand each time I approach him.

Father says, "Those were other times, Pablo . . . there were men in those days. Nowadays . . ." But he is too tired to go on. More and more as the years go by, his stiff collar chokes him like a hand.

My father, he, and I are the only ones left to sit on Friday nights at that immense table, covered

with a white cloth and a Capo-di-Monte of chubby angels and pot-bellied shepherds, with fourteen vacant chairs around it.

I rise. I pour the coffee and ask Father, "How much sugar?"

"Whatever you wish."

I never ask Pablo; that is the one intimacy I have permitted myself with him these past few years. (Ever since that day I have known how many lumps of sugar must go into his coffee.) I pick up his cup and go toward him. He has already risen from the table; I lift my eyes as far as the knot in his tie and there they stop. I have never gone on from that point. He takes the cup without even thanking me. That, too, is the only marriage between us. That silence of his; that failure to thank me for the cup of coffee, signify his complete possession of me.

Afterward, as on every Friday at that same hour, I am told that someone has come for me.

I have never known whether the people who call for me are phantoms or real persons. Nevertheless, I leave the table and kiss Father, who inquires, "Whom are you going out with today?" adding, without waiting for a reply, "Don't worry. Pablo and I have a lot to talk about."

I am aware that they no longer have anything to say to each other and that, almost as soon as I leave, Father will say good night to Pablo, pretending that tomorrow he will have to visit or be visited by some old members of the party.

Later he will say, "Keep on coming, Pablo, always. Don't ever fail."

There is no need for him to ask; Pablo will be back next Friday.

When I am ready to leave, I go to him and say with a challenging glance, "Good night, Pablo."

His name is so nearly stillborn within me that it dies in my throat; I'm afraid he may not hear it.

"Wrap up well; it's cold," he answers cuttingly.

I make no reply.

How many Friday nights are there still to come? How many? How many more days waiting for them?

Once there was that first Friday. As on all the first Fridays of the month, we planned to spend the day in town and return to Belgrano at the end of the afternoon. In those days, Mother used to take us to the Empire or the Ideal theater, depending upon the film being shown. She used to schedule every minute of those first Fridays with great care.

We would go to communion at eight o'clock mass. I believe she had chosen Las Victorias Church because it was near the Paris Confectionery, the only one to which she would take us. My sister Julieta used to say that Mother went there for the pastries and jams she was so fond of. After breakfast, we would go to the establishment of Mme. Palmés for one of those interminable fittings. Our dresses used to come down to our ankles, even though skirts were then being worn very short. Our hair, tied back with velvet ribbons, hung down our back. During the summer we wore voile or eyelet-embroidered frocks. We always looked as if we were dressed to recite a poem at a school assembly.

Mme. Palmés was short and thin; we could never understand what she was saying because of the pins she held between her teeth. Her tape measure was tied around her waist. In order to take my measurements she would lean her head on my chest and her pompadour would hit me in the face; there was the scent of a musty closet about her. At every increase in our measurements, which she jotted down in a notebook, she would gleefully exclaim: "They're getting to be young ladies. . . . How their busts have grown! That's the first sign . . . !"

Mme. Palmés frightened me as much as the woman in Japanese Park who used to do a *danse du ventre* wearing little paper wings.

At the conclusion of our visit to Mme. Palmés, we would go to the convent for lunch.

We always lunched there, for that was the day set aside by Mother for her sister, who was a nun. I think now that she used to take us there in order to avoid the only subject they had in common—Panchito Saralegui. Our Aunt Celina, whom they called Sister María José, used to turn pale when they began on the story of Panchito's daughter, Ana Saralegui. I, too, am named Ana.

During those summer siesta hours, I used to enjoy wandering through the empty corridors and silent classrooms of the school. The nuns would be asleep, and nothing cou'd be heard but Mother chatting with her sister, a dripping faucet, and the tinkling of the chapel chandeliers. But outweighing any enchantment was the approach of the hour when we would go to the motion pictures.

Despite Mother's careful selection of the program—she would permit us to see only such films as *The Little Nun* or *Broken Blossoms* ("Ellian Gish is not an actress; she's not like the rest of them," Mother used to say)—somehow, even

though it might be only on the billboards, the thing we were all waiting for always slipped in—the kiss. The kiss on the screen was to us the ultimate in sinfulness; even Julieta, fat and serious as she was, and apparently interested in nothing but sweets and sleep, used to bite her fingernails; and Isabel, hunched in her seat, would nudge me, saying, “Here it comes; here’s what we’ve been waiting for. Don’t miss it.”

At such times, Mother became our worst enemy. She would demand that we pass her the caramels or the program. We were happy when Nana took us. My seat used to seem wider then, like a separate room; my thoughts were my own, and when the kiss came, I could blush and lower my eyes, feeling within me the peculiar sensation produced by embarrassment and modesty. “Besides,” I used to think, “someday when I don’t look so young, even though I *am* sixteen, someone is going to lower his face to mine.”

But I could go no further. The images on the screen were too upsetting; I preferred to turn my eyes away and refuse to look.

Julieta and Isabel used to giggle together and gobble their candy. Nana would say coarsely, “Look at that! . . . How long is it going to last? Such eagerness!”

When the lights came on, I would feel my cheeks burning. It used to disgust me to see my sisters staring at the boys our own age with a silly smile. They would stare back in amazement. Now I know why: we were not dressed like the other girls. Mother would not hear of shorter skirts or lower waistlines. Our hair hung down our backs, loosely held by taffeta or velvet ribbons. We wore white knee-socks and black patent-leather slippers.

There are times when the past suddenly comes back to us, cruel and frightening. I am writing about the day of the duel, yet each moment of that day takes me further into the past with a clarity and detail that appall me.

I must go on writing; if I close my eyes and pause I shall feel myself assailed by all those who were inadvertent witnesses of that day.

I think that death should come to us when we have decided to close our eyes, never to open them again.

On the Friday of the duel everyone shared my exaltation. Only Isabel held herself aloof.

I remember now that my sister Isabel had rebelled against the way we were dressed and spent the entire day at her embroidery frame.

To keep her busy, Mother had set her the task of embroidering the tablecloths, curtains, and linens for the household. She did her work conscientiously and then turned to her own things. Isabel used to embroider her nightgowns with a smile on her lips. As she was getting ready for bed at night she would put on her gown before the mirror like a girl going to meet her lover.

While she braided her hair, I would stand on a pouf of lilac-colored velvet handing her her jeweled silver hairpins.

Mother disapproved of those exhibitions of Isabel's, but she used to say, "Isabel puts on an act for her sisters, but in public and with everyone else she is very shy."

One time I asked Isabel, "What would you choose for your best nightgown?"

"Black net, and I would embroider the net."

"You'd embroider net?" I asked in consternation. "And why black?"

"To set off my skin," she replied. "But you're too young to understand such things."

Anything I could not understand used to obsess me to such a point that one day I asked Mother, "Why is a black net nightgown beautiful?"

Mother left before I had the last word out.

That night Isabel, who had spent the entire day shut up in her room, stood in despair before the mirror, holding up a pink flannel nightgown like ours. With a rebellious gesture, she said, "I'll never put that thing on, never! I'll sleep naked!"

She turned off the light and got into bed.

That night I thought of the difficulties Isabel would encounter when she confessed to Father Domingo that she had slept naked. At daybreak, I got up and quietly spread another blanket over her so she would not feel cold.

Late in the afternoon, after the movie, we used to go back to Belgrano. On the way home I kept thinking constantly of the immodest and shocking thing I had done in permitting myself to become fascinated by the images on the screen. And, to punish myself, I would read until all hours. I did not dare lift my eyes to the ceiling. I cannot imagine why Mother had not had it done away with or covered over, for on it several half-naked nymphs were being carried off by Arab warriors. In Isabel's room, chubby angels were holding Leda's tunic while she submerged herself in the lake, her arms around the neck of a black swan. In Julieta's room there were

frescoes symbolizing the Apocalypse. A chariot drawn by four raging horses, ridden by warriors who held the reins in one hand and a naked woman in the other. Today I think it was not the chariot of the Apocalypse but the Rape of the Sabine Women; or some extraordinary combination of the end of the world and rape.

"It's a work of art," Nana used to say. "Professor Marvento, your mother's teacher, painted it."

"Did he paint it lying on his back?" I asked.

"Oh, he invented a very peculiar sort of mechanism; the poor soul could never hold his head straight afterward."

"That must be why the men have women's faces and the women men's faces," I reasoned. "Perhaps he couldn't see what he was doing."

"Your Aunt Celina stood below, giving him instructions."

That same dialogue often took place between Nana and me; I was never able to understand how my mother and my aunts could have watched the painting of nude women....

Nevertheless, the darkness of the theater and the images I had stared at during the afternoon would not go away; I used to clutch the Rosary in my hands to protect me. On the first Fridays of the month, I could not get to sleep until dawn.

But on that Friday, none of the usual things happened. As we were on our way to Las Victorias Church, my mother said to Jacinto, the chauffeur, "Wait for us in front of the Paris, as usual."

"I can't today, señora. I have to go back to Belgrano—the master's orders," he answered.

"Go back to Belgrano? But today is the first Friday...."

"The master gave me my orders."

"But why?"

"Didn't you know, señora? I have to call for the seconds. Luckily, the old days are coming back."

"What are you talking about? It can't be! He promised me . . . he swore it."

"That's how it is, señora. But he's not the one that's dueling; you can rest easy. It's going to take place at the house, in the grounds, at five o'clock tomorrow morning. Deputy Pablo Aguirre, the youngest party member, is one of the principals, and it's over the charge made yesterday in Congress. That matter of the lands in the south."

Mother wept so hard that Julieta drew her to her breast.

"It's a sin! It's a sin!" she cried. "In my own house, too! What an example to set his daughters! He's like his father, like all the Castros. . . ."

"No, señora," interjected Jacinto. "His grand-

father," he added, speaking directly to me, "was an honorable man. He was a witness at many duels and was always alert to what was going on. He saved the great Palencia's hand "

"Don't talk about it any more," sobbed Mother.

"Very well. And when they cut off one of his fingers, your grandfather quietly picked it up off the ground, and later that day they grafted it back on."

The portrait of Palencia, the robust gentleman in white shirt and black frock coat, with long mustaches, was indeed in the gun room, with all his fingers, and a bland smile on his lips.

Vaguely I recalled the night of another duel. I had had a presentiment since morning that something out of the ordinary was taking place in the house. Father ordered the medicine case brought down. Mother shut herself up in her room. It was Nana who awakened us at sunrise to watch from the window as black shadows moved about on the wall of the weapons room. To me it appeared a childish game, and I failed completely to comprehend Mother's distress.

Later they left the place, as though they had

merely been warming up, and began to duel in the grounds in the moonlight. Presently, at an order from Father, they stopped.

"Someone's hurt," said Nana beside me. "Or rather, the honor of the Laplacettes is satisfied. And over a woman. . . . What a shame! Still, it might be over party business. They'll forfeit their souls! And all for that stupid honor of theirs!"

By that time we had reached the church. I think now that I never received communion so sacrilegiously. A duel! At my very house! In the park, facing Arcos and Sucre Streets, near the summerhouse! Mother was weeping with choking sobs beside me. Julieta asked sadly, "Aren't we going to the Paris today?"

"Back to Belgrano, quickly. By the lower road. . . ." Mother commanded.

Julieta's piety demanded severe penances of her, penances which she was not always able to carry out; at such times she would turn to me for a pretext to evade them, even if only for a few moments. Once she made a vow to give up eating sweets for a year. She would leave the box of bonbons beside me, with some excuse; absent-mindedly

I would knock it off on the floor. Julieta would kneel beside me to pick them up, watching me anxiously. To help her, I would pick up a bonbon and put it in the box, then eat the next one.

The third time I did it, she imitated me delightfully.

Later she would say, "Dear Lord, that's what comes of imitating you. Can I have eaten four? Oh, my vow! But it's not my fault. I did it without thinking. Didn't I?"

One day Mother asked me why I never went in for spiritual exercises. I replied that there was no reason for me to make such sacrifices.

"I think there is," said Julieta. "I know what would be hardest for you. I know what your sacrifice should be."

But I refused to listen to her; I would have to make an offering to God. I reflected sadly that I, too, trifled with my conscience.

• We were back at Belgrano.

Our house stands on Cuba Street at the corner of Sucre; it is decadent *fin de siècle* in style, with a stone angel on the first-floor terrace. The angel or archangel stands alone; it forms no part of any

group. In the block they call our house The House of the Angel. Grounds surround the house on all four sides, within a fence of gilded spikes.

Overlooking Arcos where it meets Sucre, a balcony with an ivy-covered railing of caryatids gave me a view of the street.

Mother opened the main door flanked by two marble lions (Father's coat-of-arms) and went into the house.

She slammed the door which clanged like the drawbridge of a castle, and I felt as though we were being held incommunicado in a theater, where the play was about to begin that very instant.

"The curtain is going up," I said to myself. Yet from the time we left for Las Victorias Church that morning, we had been acting; we were the principals; only one was missing—Pablo Aguirre.

The house, surrounded by mist, seemed to float on air that morning.

We saw Nana approaching just inside the grille.

"Again!" she cried. "And to the death. . . . The papers say so."

"I won't let him," Mother answered firmly, and for the first time we saw her run up the stairs.

I was frightened. Father's reaction was impossible to guess.

What did we know of that man whose face was familiar to us from placards in the streets, and whose name appeared on billboards in vacant lots in red or coal-black letters?

There were times when I was ill with fever when I used to see him come up and speak to me, placing his cool hand on my forehead.

"It will go away. Everything about Ana is exaggerated; even her fevers are higher than anybody else's! Get well"—he would repeat, seating himself in a chair near my bed—"the city will be lit up for you. The national holidays are coming soon."

Immediately afterward, he would pat my cheek, look at his watch, and say, "Time—my worst enemy is time," adding somewhat disconnectedly, "when you're better I'll take you to the Dietze for some raspberry ice."

He never kept his promise. I don't know what peculiar association of events made him repeat that phrase; I had never asked him to buy me raspberry ice.

Father used to take us in the car to see the lights on the days when the city was decorated for the national holidays, or when some visiting foreigner came to Buenos Aires. Early in the morn-

ing, Jacinto would begin to polish the old Crosley and would lower the top, even though the weather was cold. Father would sit with the Secretary of the Party in the back; we on the folding seats.

We used to go down through Cuba Street to Belgrano Square, Father had the car stop in front of Dietze's and he bought us candy canes and Swiss Gandy dolls.

"We'll be back at dawn to have chocolate with vanilla."

But we always went home before midnight. He would forget his promise. And on those nights, when I closed my eyes, I used to see cities permanently lit up, fireworks, and Apocalyptic angels.

The night the city was decorated in honor of De Pinedo, the aviator, Nana took us; Father and Mother were in Europe. I watched the lights and fireworks which shot Italian and Argentine flags into the air, as well as gigantic dolls done in lights above little airplanes which symbolized the great adventure. While I was sitting on the leather cover of the top, our car struck a man. According to Nana, it was Jacinto's fault, because he was watching the lights and not the pedestrians.

"We almost killed him," said Isabel indifferently.

The mere possibility, however, brought home

to me then the conviction that our lives are so fragile that even as we walk through a lighted city, we may suddenly be plunged into darkness. The idea of death appeared to me as a transition from light to shade. I had seen dead birds, ants, flies; but I had never stopped to think that, like them, I might also die. When I got home, I wrote in my diary:

I know now that I can die. It would grieve me very much to die without ever having been kissed. I must look for a face for the times when I am at the movies on the first Fridays, or when I play with my hoop in the garden at twilight, or when I recite love poems. The one thing about death that matters to me is its loneliness. My worst punishment would be to be doomed to spend all eternity without a single face. Can what I've just written be a sin?

Mother flew up the stairs. I followed her. She went into the library where Father was, and I listened to what she was saying:

"... Not in my house. Jesus is enthroned here ... I will never permit it."

"Your house?" replied Father. "Before enthroning Him you should have let me know, or you should have burned down the gun room. There have

always been duels here. I don't know why you should be so surprised now...."

"This time it's different... I cannot tolerate it. There are the girls now...."

"Shut them in their rooms.... Or better still, I demand that you let them come down, so they can see there are still brave men, and that there will be one less idiot on the other side of the Chamber."

"How long do you think we can go on like this? How long!" she cried.

"Do you know of any way out?" Father asked, after a burst of laughter. "Or can it be that you've turned progressive? Tell me, don't you believe in the sacrament of matrimony? A final, indissoluble bond? I won't stand in your way. If you want to, let's make a start. I'll take Ana... or better still, you can take them all. You can bring them up as a job lot. Can't you? Do you think one of them will become a nun? That would be according to family custom—perhaps Julieta."

"Oh, Lord! You're hopeless! Oh, Lord! Lord! Lord! Take pity on his soul!" she cried.

At that period in my life, God was to me an old, sad, and pensive man, surrounded by storm clouds.

His image always appeared accompanied by the idea of the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

Since I was obliged to direct my prayers to that man shown in religious effigies—a pensive gentleman capable of dividing himself into three persons, a man I must always accept in a shroud of impenetrable mystery—I could not pray at that time. Today I feel sure that I began to pray only when I discovered Jesus. I still remember how Nana in her ignorance told me of His life while I was preparing for my First Communion. I would no longer have to pray, then, to that old gentleman with the pensive face; the image of Christ possessed me during the remainder of my adolescence. Even now it has not left me. I was glad He had a mother and father like me, that He had lived on earth, and not among the clouds in the sky. One Resurrection Day when Mother explained to us how Jesus ascended into heaven to sit beside the Father, I was so shocked that I cried out: “No! Not at the side of that old man; Jesus stayed on earth.”

My sisters burst out laughing. From that day on, I had to endure an hour of Catechism with a young woman of the parish who came especially to teach me. I remember that I used to sit with her in the garden, my back to the house.⁶



"No, no," she would exclaim in despair. "You must try to understand. Jesus is the Son of the Father, of Our Lord God."

"No," I would answer serenely. "Jesus is the son of Mary and Joseph." And I would show her the Catechism. "He can't be the son of an old man with a beard who has always lived among storm clouds. He didn't even come down to earth to create the world. He created it amid thunder and lightning . . .," I added.

The woman became so upset that I was afraid she was going to faint.

About that time she stopped talking about God in order to initiate me in the lives of the Saints. But there again she came up against my obstinate need to refute her.

"I don't like Judas I'haddeus. I don't like The Little Flower."

"But how can you not like the Little Saint Theresa of Lisieux, when she was a little girl as pretty as you are?" asked María Francini.

"No, she was not pretty!" I answered. "On the holy cards she's dressed about the same as we are now. She wore the same horrible dresses we do. Perhaps Mme. Palmés' grandmother made them for her . . . since she was French."

"You must not say you don't like a saint," she

stated. "The saints are our protectors, our intermediaries before God."

"I don't need any intermediaries," I replied insolently. "I have Jesus and the Virgin, and they're enough for me. Besides, they came back to life after they died. They're the only ones who still have their own bodies in heaven, their real bodies."

She lowered her eyes at my reply and sat silent in her chair. A moment later she raised her eyes heavenward and, as though calling upon the Holy Ghost, she said, "I don't know whether or not what you say is a mortal sin, but always remember this: there is no worse misfortune in this world than to try to find the answer to everything; to believe that everything has an answer is to be guilty of the sin of pride. But I can't blame you," she added gently. "You're so young.... You don't know what you're saying. Remember there is one question that no one can answer."

"What is that?" I asked.

"Death, my dear. What is death?"

I used to believe that hell was the place where we would have to suffer through all eternity whatever it was we had hated most on earth. I was

never aware of being punished for anything I had done, and I felt very tranquil and certain of my soul's salvation. I never doubted, even after that first Friday of the duel.

To me, hell was Mme. Palmés, Vicenta, Mother's voice when she and Father were quarreling, and the shame I felt for Julieta when she tried to square her conscience in order to break her vows.

However, an oil painting in the drawing room entitled "The Apocalypse" aroused such terror in me that I finally began to plan some means of destroying it. The Apocalypse and hell were one and the same thing. Both were man's punishment. I came to believe that Nana had painted "The Apocalypse." It was her story.

"It's the end of the world! Already I can hear the neighing of the four horses of the Apocalypse on stormy nights. They're going to bolt very soon now; they're so infuriated at the sins of this world, Oh, then—!" she would finish with a groan.

"What are they tied with so they won't break loose?" I would ask.

"They have no chains; they're just waiting for Our Lord's command to run wild."

"It's the Apocalypse, the announcement of the end of the world. . . . That's the way it will happen;

we'll hear the trumpets amid thunder and lightning," Nana used to say. "I hope we won't be alive on that day."

"Is it like in the painting on the ceiling?" I would ask her, to comfort myself.

Then she brought from her room the Old Testament, wrapped in a newspaper cover. Sitting at the foot of my bed, she would begin to read the Apocalypse slowly, pausing only for clarifications.

"'And,'" she read, "'when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven, as it were for half an hour.' Half an hour of silence!"

"'And I saw seven Angels standing in the presence of God; and there were given to them seven trumpets.

"'And another Angel came, and stood before the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given to him much incense, that he should offer of the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which is before the throne of God. . . .

"'And the smoke of the incense of the prayers of the saints ascended up before God from the hand of the Angel.

"'And the Angel took the censer, and filled it with the fire of the altar, and cast it on the earth

and there were thunders and lightnings, and a great earthquake.' ”

At this point in the story I used to hide under the covers and kiss Julieta's hand.

Nana would go on relentlessly. She used to recite the rest from memory, and I think she used the book only to lend greater immediacy to the narration.

“ ‘And the seven Angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound the trumpet.’ (One alongside another as in defiles.) ‘And the first Angel sounded the trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mingled with blood, and it was cast on the earth, and the third part of the earth was burnt up, and the third part of the trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up.’ Imagine it—the lawns, the poplars, everything will go!”

I thought with terror that someday the angel on the terrace would turn into one of those monsters of the Apocalypse, and I drew the blinds to shut out its shadow reflected on my window.

“ ‘And the second Angel sounded the trumpet,’ ” Nana continued, “ ‘and as it were a great mountain, burning with fire, was cast into the sea, and the third part of the sea became blood....’ Warm blood like the blood of chickens and lambs. Haven’t

you felt it on your hands?" Nana interrupted herself. "It's warm, viscid!"

"'And the third part of those creatures died, which had life in the sea, and the third part of the ships were destroyed.'"

"Did everyone drown?" I asked. "No one can drown in a sea of blood."

"Would they float?" demanded Julieta. No one answered her.

"'And the third Angel sounded the trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, burning as it were a torch, and it fell on the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters.'"

"On the fountains in the parks, too?" I inquired. "Would it fall on our house, too, on the fountain out in the garden?"

"No. We haven't come to that yet," continued Nana calmly. "Do you know the name of that star? Wormwood! A yellow liquid, pure alcohol, that the French men and some of the women drink."

"Do they drink liquid from the stars?" I asked.

"Listen, listen!" said Nana. "And don't interrupt. Yes, liquid from the stars, poison to the soul and the senses. Absinthe!"

"What the fourth Angel destroyed is not very important," she went on, "and I don't remember

it. Let's go on to the fifth. Do you know what the fifth Angel did? 'The fifth Angel opened the bottomless pit.' "

"What is the bottomless pit?"

"The abyss. Nothingness. The well without a bottom. Yes, like a well that has no end. As if it were forever empty, bottomless."

"That's horrible!" I said. "There's no such thing. There's always something at the bottom. You're bound to reach it, even though it takes millions of years."

"No," said Nana. "The earth spins in the abyss. Didn't you know that? And to the abyss we must all return."

Meanwhile, Isabel, embroidering at her frame with an imperceptible smile on her lips, seemed not to be listening.

Nana was offered. "Are you listening, or aren't you?" she demanded. "Don't you know this, is to your soul's interest? It has to do with your own salvation. I'll tell your mother. . . ."

But immediately she forgot Isabel and went on: ,

" 'And the fifth Angel opened the bottomless pit: and the smoke of the pit arose, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke of the pit.

“‘And from the smoke of the pit there came out locusts upon the earth. And power was given to them, as the scorpions of the earth have power.

“‘And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, nor any green thing, nor any tree: but only the men who have not the sign of God on their foreheads.’ Can you imagine being devoured by locusts and scorpions? And they had orders not only to devour them but to torture them for five months. Five whole months of torture!”

“Maybe those men would kill themselves rather than be tortured,” I stated.

“Ah,” said Nana with satisfaction. “God sees everything. He is just; and He knows how to punish. He took away their freedom to commit suicide at that time. No one could voluntarily quit this life . . . everyone was alive. No one can die during that time. Do you know what those locusts will be like? ‘And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were crowns like gold; and their faces were as the faces of men.

“‘And they had hair as the hair of women; and their teeth were as lions.’”

"Why weren't they painted like that then?" asked Isabel. "On the ceiling of Julieta's room? It represents the end of the world, doesn't it?"

"I don't know. It must have been too difficult. Listen!" She continued. "'And they had breast-plates as breast-plates of iron, and the noise of their wings was as the noise of chariots and many horses running to battle. And they had tails like to scorpions.'"

Nana would grow more and more excited. Neither anybody nor anything could stop her.

"'...and there were stings in their tails; and their power was to hurt men five months. . . .' Can you imagine five months of torture?" she repeated.

"Are you through?" Isabel would ask sleepily.

"No," she would say. "'And the sixth Angel loosed the four Angels who are bound in the great river Euphrates . . . for to kill the third part of men.'"

"But by now no one is alive; everyone is dead."

"What do you mean, no one is alive! Don't forget the ones being tortured; they haven't died. Remember, they couldn't die . . .," said Julieta.

"You're right, Julieta," Nana said. "'And the number of the army of horsemen was twenty thou-

sand times ten thousand . . . and the heads of the horses were as the heads of lions: and from their mouths proceeded fire, and smoke, and brimstone.' ”

“How lucky for those who had already died!”

“Everyone in hell will be resurrected to be tortured again.”

“Do you mean to say that people who are in hell right now still have to go through all that?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“You mean I’d have to go through all that for one single mortal sin?”

“‘For their tails are like to serpents and have heads. . . .’ Instead of a tail they had a snake . . . a live snake.”

“But that’s horrible!”

“What about the seventh?” I asked.

“That doesn’t matter much either. . . . Then,” she went on, “‘a great sign appeared in heaven. A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

“‘And being with child, she cried travailing in birth, and was in pain to be delivered. . . .’ Well, she was expecting a baby. You’re big girls now; you can hear this. But don’t you listen, Ana; this

is not for you," she would say, laughing, "'... was in pain to be delivered,' poor little thing! She was suffering terrible birth pains."

I put my hands over my ears; I could not go on listening. Nevertheless, Nana would lower her voice and go on slowly:

"'And there was seen another sign in heaven: and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns: and on his head seven diadems.

"'And his tail drew a third part of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth, and the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to be delivered; that, when she should be delivered, he might devour her son.

"'And she brought forth a man child... and her son was taken up to God, and to his throne. And the red dragon prevailed not with him.' As you see, it was the Virgin; the child that was born was Jesus... and the dragon was the devil."

"Liar!" I screamed, beside myself. "Liar!"

Julieta left her embroidery frame and Nana dropped her book on the floor.

"Do you dare to call the word of the Holy Gospel a lie... of the New Testament? The very word of God! Do you dare say such a thing?"

"Liar!" I kept shrieking. "Jesus was born in a

manger without causing the Virgin any pain and there were no dragons, just the Three Wise Men and some sheep and kids. Liar!"

Nana began to weep disconsolately. I had jumped out of bed and was laying about me with the flat of a book which I had taken off the night table as if with a sword. I must have frightened them, for Julieta put her arms around Nana and soothed her, saying, "Why do you pay attention to her? She's only a child. Don't mind her."

"Liar!" I went on shouting. "You'll go to hell for your stories just like the Headsman of Palermo and the Knights of Darkness. I don't believe a word you say. There are no locust-angels. And Jesus was born in a manger; and there are no horses with serpents' tails."

Mother's arrival put a stop to it. Nana pretended to be looking for something on the floor, and I instinctively crawled into Julieta's bed.

"What's going on?" she demanded.

"Nothing. They didn't want to go to sleep and Ana is being naughty."

"Don't forget the forty hours tomorrow," said Mother, closing the door behind her.

She went away. Nana picked up the book off the floor and left the room, still crying. Isabel went

back to her embroidery as though nothing had happened. Julieta put her arms around me; I did not go to sleep that night until dawn.

I went to look for the morning paper, and read eagerly:

In the halls of Congress, it is whispered that Deputy Pablo Aguirre will fight a duel at dawn tomorrow at Belgrano, on the property of X. This young politico will risk his life to defend his party from the accusations of Deputy Esquivel.

Yesterday we listened to his ringing, vigorous, and courageous speech which echoed like a cascade, like a cataract from the walls of the hallowed Chamber. His imposing figure and the assurance of his words disarmed his adversary. We do not ally ourselves, in any way, with any political faction, but we feel confident that this courageous young man is one of the great hopes of our country. May God, in His implacable justice, decide the outcome.

What I had just read seemed to me pompous; I folded the paper as though I had been caught reading something forbidden. However, Pablo Aguirre had shown himself to my eyes in those few lines, and all the events of that day would be

dedicated to him. I soon foresaw that this name could no longer be separate from mine. I wrote in my diary:

His name is Pablo Aguirre. I can hardly speak the name; nor do I know why I am writing about him. Tomorrow he is going to fight a duel in the grounds. Perhaps near the summerhouse among the wisterias. He may be mortally wounded and fall in the very spot where I lie down for my siestas in the summer. Perhaps he won't die. But he ought to, as in the novels. But first he ought to fall in love with me. I will plant magnolias on the spot where he will fall wounded. He hasn't time to fall in love with me; he doesn't even know me, and he would never guess that his name figures in this book. I'm ashamed of myself; I've always dreamed that things would happen suddenly, of love at first sight, and that all the rest of my life would stem from that moment. I feel certain this is a red-letter day for me. Even if we are kept in our rooms, I shall try to get out; I'm going to witness this duel.

I've been living through this day as though it were a movie script; my movements are so fore-ordained that they seem like those of an actress; I wonder why my sisters haven't noticed. I know that every moment of this day belongs to me. I am its protagonist; an unseen hand directs my steps.

When the afternoon paper comes, I'll see if his photograph is in it. I'll keep it always with some pressed flowers in my missal or in my book of precepts and prayers.

We were repeating the Ten Commandments and the precepts with the same intonation as our prayers and litanies. But each time we reached the Sixth Commandment, someone—Vicenta, Julieta, or Isabel—would nudge me.

"What is there about the Sixth Commandment? Why do you always laugh?" I asked one day.

"Nothing. . . . Don't you know? It means you mustn't lie. *Thou shalt not lie!* White lies come under the Eighth Commandment."

Even today I can remember the endless *Our Fathers* and *Hail Marys* this confusion brought me.

"Father, I have broken the Sixth Commandment," I confessed airily.

I can still remember the groan I heard on the other side of the lattice. And the incomprehensible advice given me to prevent a recurrence.

"What penance did you get? It looks like you'll never finish it," they exclaimed after I had spent hours saying the Rosary in the chapel.

"One Rosary," I replied sadly.

"A whole Rosary! And the litany, too?"

"What for? What for?" they asked.

One afternoon I told Mother I never forgot to say my bedtime prayers, but, since that was not true, I quickly went back into her room and said to her in front of Father, "Mother, I have just committed adultery."

"What did you say?" she shrieked.

Father paused in his reading.

"Yes. Forgive me."

"For heaven's sake, explain yourself, Ana."

"I don't say my prayers at night as I told you a minute ago."

Father sat me on his lap and pressed my face to his chest.

Neither of them said a word. She hung her head; Father glared at her with hatred and scorn, while he held me on his knee.

The next day, Señorita Francini came hurriedly into my room and said, "Repeat the Ten Commandments, one by one."

When I reached the Sixth, she said, "What do you understand by..." She dared not pronounce the word.

"Not to lie," I said.

"Very well . . . that's not exactly it. It means doing something contrary to the purity of the body and soul," she stammered.

But she could not go on. However, I never used that word again.

One night I asked Nana, "With whom are we going to spend eternity? What people can we take with us into eternity?"

"I don't understand you," she replied. "Ask Señorita Francini. Perhaps she can answer you."

That afternoon, María Francini had scarcely arrived and begun to adjust the combs in her knot of hair and smooth down her skirt when I burst out all in one breath, "Shall we meet the people we loved on earth in eternity?"

"What do you mean, child?" she asked, shocked.

"I want to know whether I can take someone to eternity with me."

"First he'd have to die," she replied, absently.

"If that person dies, will God let me remember him through all eternity?"

The woman thought awhile.

"I don't know," she said sadly. "I'd have to look it up."

A few days later, I saw her come in joyously, the New Testament in her hand. She settled herself in a chair and with the book still closed, she said, "Ana, I want you to repeat your question. I've found the answer."

"I want to know," I repeated with assurance, "if when I die I'll keep on remembering through all eternity . . . that is, whether I'll be with the person I loved most on earth; and at the resurrection of the body whether that person will be beside me with his same face and hands? I want to know who'll be with me in eternity."

"Listen to me, Ana," she said. "Perhaps I shouldn't answer your question because you're very young yet, and there are certain things you don't understand. You imagine that heaven is like earth, and that is not so. There is forgetting there. You'll no longer remember what you loved; you'll forget the petty things of this world. We shall be with God and of God. Do you understand? You will enter into the spirit of God. I've brought you an example of this from the Gospel. Please don't ask me any more questions afterwards. Just consider that this is not final either. For it was told us through the mouth of Saint Luke. But listen—

There were therefore seven brethren: and the first took a wife, and died without children.

And the second took her to wife, and he died childless.

And the third took her; and in like manner the seven also: and they left no children and died.

Last of all the woman died also.

Therefore in the resurrection, whose wife of them is she? for seven had her to wife.

And Jesus answering said unto them, The children of this world marry and are given in marriage:

But they which shall be accounted to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage.

Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God being the children of the resurrection.

“So you see,” she went on, “the word of God has answered you. Don’t worry about eternity. You won’t desire or love anything but Him; therefore everything will be on the same level.”

“Then I’d rather not love anyone here on earth,” I replied.

“You must love only through love of God.”

I covered my face with my hands. She spoke then as though moved. “Don’t worry, Ana. Now

I'll tell you a story you'll like. Once there was a young son of a shepherd who had raised a kid from the time it was born. After a while the boy was taken seriously ill. Before he died, he asked his parents to kill the kid so it would go to heaven with him.

"The boy died and the parents sadly fulfilled his last wish.

"Soon the sun was darkened and the shepherds beheld an angel descending from the sky and it carried off the kid."

When María Francini finished the story, I gratefully threw myself in her arms and wept with her.

"Someone is going to see the ceiling reflected in your eyes," Vicenta said to me in a low voice.

My first sensation was one of embarrassment. The ceiling in my room would reflect in my eyes nude nymphs, Arab warriors, and Leda's bath.

My thoughts came in the following order: I would take care to find a proper ceiling; then I wondered why and how someone would be able to see it in my eyes.

I began to picture a beautiful ceiling for my eyes to reflect.

According to Nana, Julieta's ceiling, Professor Marvento's masterpiece, depicted the Apocalypse, where the women had men's faces and the men, women's faces, and the horses, cows' faces. In Mother's room, on the other hand, the dawn of progress was symbolized—the scales of justice, test tubes, an automobile, and even a train. The painting in the drawing room was the most beautiful; it had clusters of grapes, angels, and garlands held by nude women about to enter the water.

This was the only ceiling not done by the brush of Professor Marvento and his pupils, Mother and my aunts.

But Vicenta had disclosed the possibility that someone might see the ceiling reflected in my eyes.

It became a question of choosing the most favorable hour of the day—dawn, dusk, or moonlight.

After this long preamble, I started to tremble. For someone to see the ceiling reflected in my eyes, I would have to be lying on my back, and he would have to be above me.

I then heard the echo of Vicenta's laugh which

completed the sentence. Instinctively, I lay face downward so no one could see my blushes, and I diverted myself by watching the course of an ant in the grass.

It was best not to think. Any thought whatsoever could bring me inevitably face to face with the final question. I felt disconsolate and defenseless.

I have said that I associated death with mortal sin. That was no mere association of words: dying equaled sin. And as I could not at that time imagine the possibility of committing a mortal sin, I believed that I was therefore incapable of dying. Mortal sin and death were a punishment in themselves, a guilt arising from original sin. I could not feel responsible for that.

No one could help me to comprehend that gratuitous guilt left by two people unknown to me. Nana's horrendous tales were my punishment, as were my parents' quarrels, the paralyzed woman across the street, and the fear bred in me by a man who used to walk along Arcos Street in the afternoons, wearing yellow shoes and white gaiters and carrying a cane topped with a viper's head.

The idea of the resurrection of the dead at the ending of the world aroused absurd notions in me;

the questions they led me to ask Señorita Francini made my sisters laugh.

"How old shall we be when we're resurrected?" I would inquire. "How old will Father be? And Nana? And Vicenta?"

"Whatever age they are when they die," she said one time.

"What about the mad people? At what point do they lose their souls?" I went on immediately.

She could not answer me.

During mass, and particularly during the music, I used to be so inattentive that I would sometimes laugh and talk aloud. Mass was a sacrifice, and it caused me great sorrow to think that Jesus must die millions of times, every day, on earth. The sacrifice is repeated millions of times. I therefore tried to convince myself that it was not the sacrifice of Jesus, but Abraham's sacrifice.

The Old Testament seemed more remote and less sad. I could not accept the idea of the daily death of Jesus. I loved Him as one often seen, like Charlie Chaplin or the man who sold cotton candy. His mere name made me smile.

Isabel and Julieta used to laugh at me all the time. Even Nana could not restrain her laughter. I felt quite sure of myself in front of them and

I tried to make my questions more and more pointed. But this phase did not last long. Perhaps my teacher, in her perturbation over me, had a sixth sense which drew me to her and enabled her to teach me the dogmas I must accept.

One day María Francini and I were on the terrace facing Arcos and Sucre Streets when it began to rain. We were to go to the circus that afternoon. The rain was spoiling all our plans.

"Perhaps if you say a prayer and ask God to stop the rain, a miracle will happen," she said timidly.

"Whom shall I ask?" I replied.

"Why, God."

"No, not God."

"Well, then, Jesus, Who is also God."

I knelt on the ground, joined my hands, and without saying a prayer, I asked that the rain might stop. She had taken off her glasses and was waiting anxiously, looking first at me and then at the sky.

I had hardly finished praying when it began to rain harder.

"You see?" I said. "All because I prayed to God, that old man with a beard."

Just then Nana came out and said, "You'll have

to hurry with your lesson before it rains harder; the car is waiting for you. Julieta and Isabel are already in it. You must leave immediately before your mother comes home and decides not to let you go."

I realized that only a miracle would have kept Mother from coming home that afternoon.

I looked at María Francini and said, "Is God the father of Christ?"

"What a child!" she answered.

I was glad she could still smile, even though she showed all her teeth. But immediately I thought with consternation that now she would often smile.

That day we did not go to the circus; since it was raining, Nana suggested that we go to a picture show.

I was glad of that; I had been afraid I might meet the man with the viper's-head cane at the circus.

Mother continued to sob.

"You'll go to hell; you'll go to hell," she threatened.

"What about you?" asked Father. "Won't you

go to hell, too? Are you so sure? Why so many penances then? Don't worry. Blame me for the duel if it makes you feel better."

"I've put up with everything from you, everything, but not this! This is not the movies; life is not a film, nor a novel. We're here to work out our salvation, you know that; to work out our salvation."

"You won't go to hell because of a duel in your house. Light the candles; perhaps if you pray no one will be killed. . . ."

I heard a moan. Then a long silence. I was hiding in the turn of the stairs. I would have no peace until I could see Father go out.

Mother had said, "This is not the movies." However, among the shadows in the angle of the stairs, I thought the voices I was hearing took the place of music in the motion pictures.

For a moment I feared that Mother might persuade Father. But soon I heard his footsteps coming down the stairs, and he slammed the library door behind him.

"He won't come out all day," I thought. "He won't let anyone in, either; the duel is the only thing that matters to him, and to me."

"The duelists will come along Cuba or Arcos Street," I was thinking. "They'll be wearing black hoods so they won't be recognized. They'll enter the grounds through the gate on Arcos Street. I shall go out into the garden, dressed in a beautiful white nightgown which I'll filch from Julieta.

"Pablo Aguirre will think he's seeing a sleep-walking vision, or a lady come to protect him in the duel. . . . Death can be beautiful; sometimes it takes the form of a woman instead of the Fate shown in the pictures. I shall stretch out my hand to his face and say, 'Until eternity. . . .'

"Then he'll bow to me and dedicate his death to me, as the gladiators used to do. And he'll lay his black cloak beside me. Father will smile happily because all the insults hurled at the Party by Deputy Esquivel will be wiped out."

That one moment would suffice to make me remember him all my life, I thought. And also to make me completely happy. I would think of him every afternoon in the grounds, and on the spot where he had fallen, run through by a sword or a bullet—I was not sure whether the duel would be fought with sabers or pistols—I would plant a magnolia tree.

"Perhaps at the very moment of his death," I thought, "he will turn his face to me, and I, forgetting Father and everyone else, will bend above him. Later I will gently cover his face with the blood-stained handkerchief."

I now believe that at that time I was unable to make much of a distinction between the cloak-and-dagger novels, the screen dramas I used to watch, and Nana's yarns. Gladiators, duclists, soldiers, widows, and star-crossed lovers were all mixed up together. Nothing was important. Only the moment mattered; the moment when the swords would start to slash the air.

All was silence in Mother's room. I remained hidden in the angle of the stairs. I was waiting for some sign that would signify her presence so that I might leave without being caught.

"This is not the movies," Mother had said.

Really it was a pity that we could not always live as if we were in the movies.

Never shall I be able to understand how we happened to see *One Night of Love* with Vilma Banky and Ronald Colman. Before the pianist started to play "Lady from Spain," a man appeared

on the stage and said that the film *Broken Blossoms* could not be shown because it had not completed its run at the Ideal. In its place, they would show *One Night of Love*.

Nana gave no indication that we should leave. On the contrary, she settled herself in her seat. When the lights went off, we watched, holding our breath, while the lord of a castle bore off a gypsy on her bridal night.

Years later, the gypsy bridegroom, in his turn, carried off the feudal lord's sweetheart in revenge, also on her wedding night. The gypsy and the nobleman's bride alternately loved and hated each other throughout the film. That conflict of feelings reduced me to such despair that I started to cry disconsolately.

How could they love and hate each other at the same time? How can feelings be so mixed up?

The two protagonists seemed to hate each other, yet in the end, they would embrace each other violently and passionately. Then they would start all over again. What kind of love was this between those two people? Doubtless it was something quite different from the protective love that Lillian Gish seemed to be seeking in *The Little Nun* or *Broken Blossoms*. Yet the film concluded on an augury of

future happiness for the two leading characters.

This was not the kind of love I had learned about through *María* and the numerous other novels which we had surreptitiously passed from seat to seat in school. Presently it seemed to me that my heart had stopped beating; I tried not to breathe; the screen swelled in a long kiss that lasted several seconds; the pianist's hands, meanwhile, had been indicating disapproval through the highest notes on the keyboard.

I began to pray. Yet it was not a prayer I was murmuring, but a poem:

My two hands on an icy mirror
Must trace the outline of your lips.

Julietta noticed me. "Are you praying?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"What an idiot!" she commented.

After that scene, Nana said, "He had caught her properly, hadn't he? They were stuck together . . . like two flies!"

Despite that sense of depression and embarrassment the picture aroused in me, I determined to try out on my cousin, Julian, the looks and gestures employed by Vilma Banky. When we came home

to Belgrano that night I practiced for hours in front of the mirror some of the scenes from *One Night of Love*.

From that day forth I purloined from Nana's room some of the books she used to buy surreptitiously from a man in dark glasses. He would knock timidly at the service entrance. In the vestibule he would unload a wooden case and display a fine collection of hand-colored postcards; the books were hidden in the bottom of the case.

Nana was never aware that the books had disappeared from her room. I believe now that they were not on the Index, but that the man concealed them in the bottom of the case to make them more salable.

After the afternoon when I chanced to see *One Night of Love*, poetry and prayers took second place in my life.

Nana had *The Son of the Sheik* in her room. I knew the film had been forbidden us, and I hid in the weapons room to read it at one sitting.

After that, I began imagining that Valentino was one of the Arabs in the fresco on the ceiling of my room and that he was carrying me off to the desert with him.

I began also to spin a narrative involving epi-

sodes which occurred again and again; they would break off when I fell asleep, only to be resumed on the following night: The passions dominating the leading lady were arrogance and pride. She personified my dreams;⁶ sometimes the face was my own; sometimes it was Vilna Banky's.

During that time, poetry and puppets ceased to interest me. But on moonlight nights, when the angel on the terrace was visible, I would murmur:

My two hands on an icy mirror
Must trace the outline of your lips.

I used to think that nothing could be left in the wake of passion but the desire to seek the shape of the lips of the beloved in the mirror.

That day I wrote the following which I thought worth placing in my diary:

"She will die with the first winds of autumn," said the voices, "when the trees shed their leaves."

I found a needle and thread. José María shook the trees near her window. All that summer we toiled without ceasing; sewing the leaves to their branches. Yet we failed to finish in time.

Half of a tree in the garden was left. And she died with the first winds of autumn. Perhaps we forgot her while we were eating pears and plums.

There are days, as I said, when our past suddenly appears before us, and we watch its events as though they were happening in a film.

I am writing about that Friday of the duel; that stands alone in my memory, yet each moment of it leads me back into the past. As though the reality of that Friday, its definitive echo, had begun in days long preceding it.

The whole morning lay before me, and I kept wishing that the hours would go by quickly. I remember it was the day when the Municipal Band played in Barrancas Square and I slipped away from the house through the Arcos gate.

The band was installed under a kind of rotunda with a pagoda roof. The march from *Aida* followed *Die Meistersinger*.

The balloon seller, the candy peddler, and I all sat on the steps of the bandstand. I don't know how long I spent in the square that morning, trying to make my mind a blank in order to kill time. I was thinking only of Mother. How could she forbid my excursions made in an attempt to ward off, growing up, when they alone seemed capable of holding me fast to my childhood? The Municipal Band was not in Barrancas Square that morning. In

its place was the Salvation Army beneath the rotunda, and its band had just struck up "Save Yourself, Brother." A big placard announced: "Public confession today by Sister Plácida."

When "Save Yourself, Brother" had come to an end, I advanced one step up the little stairway with the candy seller. Sister Plácida was sustained by two women; she was laughing and crying at the same time. The trombone announced the act, as in the circus. The others were going out to detain the passers-by; but no one stayed except the candy seller and me; even the balloon peddler left us; he went away laughing.

Sister Plácida talked like this: "I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned. . . . Take me back to your arms. I betrayed my parents, my husband; and later my children. . . ."

Several times I looked around me. Each time the woman repeated "I have sinned," a blast from the trombone assailed us. I failed to understand how this woman was able to betray, in turn, her parents, her husband, and her son. What if there had been more people in the Square? I thought of the shame I felt at kneeling before the Confessional and I prayed that my parents would never take it into their heads to join the Salvation Army. I believed

at that time that the religion of the parents inevitably became that of the children.

I pictured Isabel in Barrancas Square trying to tell about the night she slept naked; and Julieta confessing to the candy man and me that she always used to place the box of bonbons beside me so I could brush them to the floor and thus she would be able, absent-mindedly, to break her promise.

When the woman had finished her shrieking, a man came up to me and said, "These are for your parents," and he handed me some leaflets.

"They go to confession in church," I replied. "They'd be ashamed to tell their sins in the square," and I ran away.

I was afraid I would have to confess that morning and would have to say that in my house, The House of the Angel, arrangements were being made for a duel on the following morning.

To avoid being seen, I went home through Sucre Street. We had a gay and lively lunch in the greenhouse. Nana told us in minute detail about the last duel, between Pino and Labourdette in the year 1920.

"How the swords flashed in the moonlight!"

she said. "The silence of the night was so profound that not a soul would have dared to interrupt them. Not even the Headsman of Palermo . . . no one!

"They carried the dead man out through the basement passageway, behind the stables."

"Will one of them die tonight?" I asked Nana, as though she could answer me.

"No one knows," she replied. "But this is going to have consequences . . . I feel it in my bones."

"What kind of consequences?" I said, as if she had been able to divine my daydreams.

"I don't really know," she answered with a worried look. A moment later, she added: "I've never seen your mother like this. She won't forgive him this time. It's a sin, a mortal sin."

Most of Nana's days were spent in the kitchens, telling stories of beheadings, murders, rapine, and ghosts. Julieta begged her at night to recount to us the latest crime news in *Crítica*.

During my fevers and my long convalescences, I recalled, she used to sit at the foot of my bed, reciting:

Where are you going so fast with that bundle?
I'm going to throw it in the lake.
It's the body of Ernesto Conrado
Which I have just dismembered.

Then she would tell us in exact detail the manner in which the Headsman of Palermo had carved up the body of his victim.

"That's nothing. What about the Altamirano woman? The one who let a hundred children starve to death—the wicked, perverted monster?"

Mother never reprimanded her for telling us those tales. Sometimes I think she believed Nana was initiating us into life by means of them.

In the course of Nana's stories, I used to try to distract my mind with the shadow of the angel on the terrace thrown up on my window. But fear would suddenly grip me, and I would scream. Julieta used to take me in her arms.

"Life passes slowly, hour by hour, and on winter's nights, there's nothing but a silent phantom in the quiet grove," she would begin.

"Don't be silly. Don't scream. If you aren't quiet, Nana will forget the details," Julieta would scold.

"Go on, Nana," she used to say, holding my head to her breast.

Nana often used to tell us about the woman named Irma Avegno, then she would rattle off a song called *Poor Irma*, which unfolded the story of the woman's torment by dogs and police.

Nana would dance around the room in time to the song.

"The police set the dogs on her, and she killed herself in the forest," she would say. "Her sister, a nun, refused to let her into the convent. She wouldn't grant her asylum. . . . Poor Irma," and she went on dancing in time to the song.

Nana's tales were many. After the Headsman of Palermo, they were, in order, the perverted Altamizano woman; Parisio, who murdered children by thrusting pins into their heads; the Knights of Darkness, and the Sleepwalker.

One day Nana learned that I had a schoolmate named Leticia Dorrego.

"Ah," she said. "All her family's graves were robbed of their dead. The Dorregos have no corpses."

She went on to give us a detailed account of what she had seen as a child.

"I knew one of the Knights of Darkness. He used to live in Alsina Street. They were grave robbers. There were seven of them. All from well-known families. What a scandal! They used to go out at night hooded like the Ku Klux Klan. And they stole all the Dorrego cadavers, all their dead," she concluded.

"Hasn't Leticia Dorrego any dead relatives?"

"No, the Dorregos will have to start to die. The Knights are worse than the Headsman of Palermo. Their souls can never rest in peace. Never!"

"Neither will the souls of the violated cadavers rest in peace," I said.

My sisters started to weep softly, but I comforted them. "Don't pay any attention. We have nothing to be afraid of; we're alive. They're only interested in the dead, in cadavers."

That night, for the first time, the shadow of the angel did not take the form of the Headsman.

The Knights of Darkness had routed him.

I was right. The Knights of Darkness might visit us that evening and their shadows dance on the walls of the house without harm to us. We were alive; we had nothing to fear.

During that period I began to have frequent nightmares, I remember. But after a time, I realized that the nightmares occurred before sleep, while I was still awake. The shadow of the angel was sometimes transformed into the Headsman, sometimes into Parisio; Mother's prayers, audible through the wall, became the moans of Irma Avegno.

My screams would carry to the servants' quar-

ters. The first person I would see when I awoke was Nana, trying to explain away my fears.

"What are you afraid of? If you say your prayers, nothing can happen to you. Pray to Saint Rita and ask her to bring you good dreams. Do you want me to light a candle to her?"

Nana would fall asleep beside me, sitting on the floor with her head next my arm; her hairpins would fall out and scatter between the sheets and cause me to dream that Parisio was sticking pins all through my body. From time to time, I would pat her head. What could Nana have been doing during that siesta hour in the basement of The Poplars—during that warm and humid summer nap?

The basement was the darkest and most isolated part of the house; it had once done duty as a wine cellar, but when Father married, he had it made over into a catch-all. Rats, cobwebs, and bats infested it. Only my cousins dared to disobey the strict order not to go down there.

"We have men's business to talk over," they would say.

We used to think they knew everything, and that in their cellar colloquies, they unraveled the "mysteries of life," as they used to tell us.

We were forbidden to play in the cellar. One day I overheard Mother say, "Solitude and sin are boon companions. And with darkness to boot. . . ."

"Aren't you afraid of rats and spiders?" they would ask us.

But that steep staircase, spiraling downward into the void, used to fascinate me.

"We could take our clothes off," suggested Vicenta, "that is, down to our petticoats. If we close the entrance the boys will never see us; we could spend our siesta there quietly, talking."

But the other girls never dared to raise the cellar door. I think our elders used to control us by whim during that period; not by the system of punishment, but by something more subtle—the fear of mortal sin. Any lapse of ours might lead us to commit an irreparable deed which would doom us to our immediate death. I say to our death, for they had never explained to us that mortal sin is the death of the soul, not of the body.

"Death is the punishment for original sin," they used to say. They never even mentioned pardon or redemption.

I believe that even Vicenta was constantly more preoccupied with the death of the body than of the soul.

In those days I thought my guilt would be the less if I bore it all alone.

I slipped into the cellar from the rear of the house. A feeling of well-being ran through me as soon as I left the spiral staircase behind me.

This helped me partly to forget the possible punishment of soul and body. I was carrying two big pillows; I lay down beneath a grilled skylight through which a thin ray of light filtered. I had sneaked out a book of poems entitled *Languor* to read.

But the silence and the shadows invited me to let my imagination roam with me; I had no desire to sleep. I was afraid to let the hours slip by until my absence would be noticed. Hence I started to invent a plot for my next puppet show.

After a time, I sensed another presence in the cellar, one that was neither rat nor bat.

I was no longer alone. I tried to keep from moving, but unconsciously I kept crawling away from the light to avoid being seen.

In one end of the cellar a wrapped bundle was moving. Then I saw some hair, and, at one end of the bundle, two feet waving in the air. Then Nana's profile. Half her face was hidden by one arm, and with the other fist she was beating on

the floor. A closed book lay in front of her eyes.

I felt my whole body freeze. A moment later, Nana sat up and began to grope on the floor for some pebbles which she added to a pile she was making. Then she knelt on the stones. She remained there a long time, her hands clasped and eyes raised to heaven. I seized the opportunity to slip toward the outside stairway. The bats were starting to squeak.

When I reached the garden, I threw myself on the warm earth and stayed there for a while. What could Nana be doing during that siesta time in the cellar, and why did she go to such a dark and mysterious spot to do penance?

One afternoon Nana took us to Japanese Park. I shall never forget that autumn day in 1925. The cold was not intense, yet it knifed through my clothing and kept me from throwing myself into the games. The first thing we did was to buy cones and cotton candy. Later we had some snapshots, taken in a cardboard automobile and in an airplane. We swore we would never tell Mother, and that we would keep the pictures ourselves forever.

Nana ran with us from place to place. She

romped with everyone and talked back to the big boys.

The fire-eater, the fattest woman in the world, the bearded lady, and the cannibal were all four in the same sideshow. I wanted to participate in all the amusements, but the wide choice bewildered me. I knew that inevitably we would have to return to Belgrano before dark; a long time might elapse before we could visit Japanese Park again. Presently I noticed that a cardboard angel, like the one on the terrace outside my room, was guarding the opening to a dark tunnel with an entrance that looked like a dragon's mouth.

Huge signs proclaimed that it was "The Tunnel of the Angels," "Paradise," "The Tunnel of Love." Nana refused to take us there.

"It's for lovers," she said.

Beside the angel, paired with him, a half-naked woman was swaying through contortions.

"*La danse du ventre*," shouted a man with a black mustache, at her side.

This strange, half-naked woman wore two small paper wings.

Her movements were so unlikely that I could only think, all the while, that the woman was trying to move her wings in time with her belly.

"Don't worry, they're part of the amusements; they're stupid and boring," said Isabel.

I recalled a poem I had read as a child:

Luna Park sometimes laughs through its tears.
Sometimes it laughs until it cries.

In Japanese Park the man with the cane would always appear unexpectedly.

The cane with the viper's head seemed like a charmed snake. It was the first thing I would see, coiling docilely at my feet. First the snake, then the shiny yellow shoes, visible beneath the white gaiters with black buttons, fastened at the ankles. The tight trousers covered his legs like a checked skin, held up by a gold chain constricting his belly. His chest was hidden inside the cardboard box of a hard shirt, a box which seemed to cage within it some desperate animal. Then the face; the eyes were round and moved like beads in a box. A wide hat covered his forehead, and a waxed mustache outlined his mouth.

"What a beautiful child! Come, I'll help you on, the swing," he would say, lifting me up.

The square, the park, the merry-go-round would seem to vanish then.

He would bring his beady eyes close to mine,

and fear would paralyze my legs and arms. I would close my eyes to shut him out, and when the swing came to rest, he would no longer be at my side.

In trying to explain my anxiety, I could only manage to say, "The viper, the viper!"

"Where? What is it? It can't be," Nana would say.

"There! There!"

Nothing would be there but the footprints of the man in the yellow shoes and white gaiters. On the day following a meeting with him, I would wake up in the dark. I did not want to go back to the park, and I would hide in the corners of the house like a little lost animal. One day, while I was convalescing from a fever, I thought I saw him peering at me through the windows.

I think I fainted. Neither Nana nor my sisters could imagine where the viper was.

There were intervals of several years when the man with the viper's head cane never appeared. But I was always expecting him. He would suddenly be there at the entrance to the circus, at the school door, or on a corner watching a parade. But I never expected to meet him on the Ferris wheel in Japanese Park.

When I was up in the air, close, very close to

the stars, high above the lighted city, my hand felt the coldness of marble and the known form of the viper's head fell beside me. Then came the shoes, the gaiters, and the white sandwich boards with a sign that seemed to flame and then go out:

"*Cra . . . na . . . di*," was all I managed to read.

"Do you like it, little girl?" he asked, flashing the sign on and off.

What happened next? I remember I came to hearing a woman's voice.

"She got dizzy," said Nana.

"She was scared," said another voice.

"I heard her scream, 'The viper, the viper!'"

"Where? Where is it?" they asked.

"The viper," I insisted. "The viper."

But no one had noticed the cane which ended in a viper's head.

That afternoon in Japanese Park I thought sadly that a cold wind would soon take all the life from the rides, for, as I told myself, it was the last afternoon of autumn, perhaps the first of winter. The Ferris wheel would utter a pitiful, rusty moan as it turned in the wind.

That night I wrote in my diary:

I feel sad because I've seen the angel on my terrace beside a fat woman who moved her belly in time to a snake charmer's flute. I am sad, for soon the cold days will be here, and the chimney sweeps will come here again. I'm afraid of them.

During one long convalescence, as I was reading in my room, a chimney sweep fell down the chimney. Without so much as a smile for me, he crossed the room, leaving black footprints on the floor.

They remind me of the phantom knight in the film *The Little Match Girl*. The knight was Death.

I think chimney sweeps are born in the winter and die with the coming of summer. They are resurrected to free the souls in torment imprisoned in the chimneys.

Only the angel on the terrace wears the same smile, winter and summer. But not all angels smile like the angel on my terrace. Above my bed there used to be an empty, hollow angel made of cloth. Its inside was used to hold lavender-scented handkerchiefs. Sometimes at night, I used to take it down carefully and explore with my hand the hollow space in its breast.

I thought I could feel its heart beating in emptiness.

Sometimes that same angel used to rest its feet on the lid of a powder box; sometimes on icing as it flew above a slice of wedding cake; sometimes

a Capo-di-Monte, other times a Saxe. It used to like to look at the street through the doors and windows. It had to mingle with the lace angels in the curtains to do this.

The woman who did the *aanse du ventre* had two wings, of paper, of course; but it seems to me that perhaps if she had used her wings as hard as her belly she might have been able to fly, too.

I don't know why I'm writing about angels today. I've just been reading this over. It sounds like someone else's work. Perhaps if I keep thinking of these things—angels, the park, the fountain—someday I may write a poem.

I have taken no pleasure in the stories and the puppet play I've written. I'd like to write a love poem like those in *Ocre*, the book that Isabel reads on the sly. I don't dare copy in this notebook something I wrote, which starts like this:

It's long ago I saw the light of day
And breathed the warm air of afternoon.
No one now can soothe my pain,
And no one hears my weeping.

Julietta and Isabel seemed to take no interest in Nana's yarns about bygone duels. But Nana kept on talking; finally I was no longer listening. My anxiety was stronger than any of Nana's stories. I wanted to be alone.

When we had finished lunch, I went to lie down beneath the summerhouse among the wisteria vines, facing the weapons room. The paving stones were burning hot from the midday sun, and the ferns exhaled a bittersweet scent, as though the dampness had forced the insects to come to the surface of the earth.

A kind of suffocating oppression made my whole body languid. The oscillation of an old swing between two apple trees fascinated and hypnotized me; not a leaf was stirring, yet the swing rocked all by itself, as by some mysterious impulsion.

I opened my notebook and wrote:

At daybreak tomorrow morning, there will be a duel in the park. I shall be a witness to that duel. One of the duelists is named Pablo Aguirre. The mere name makes me tremble; I don't know why. I could wish this siesta hour might never end. After it, things will start to happen. I think I shall not be able to stop them. I brought this notebook here because I wanted to read it again; I have always believed that there are fateful days. Perhaps what I am thinking today may be sheer fantasy, and tomorrow may dawn like any other day. But, please God, let something happen to

me today. It doesn't matter whether I shall ever be happy again. But today something must happen to me that will change my life. Perhaps a happiness as great as that I felt on the wedding day of Mother's youngest sister.

I never felt happier, running through the garden with my cousins. No one bothered about us; we were eating wedding cake out of our hands; we slipped into every corner of the house and garden, among the guests' legs and the bride's veil. But later, in the middle of the night—after the lovers had left—a shudder ran through the whole place; the bridegroom had killed himself.

Some said it was over gambling debts. Others smiled ironically. Nana took us back to the house, and on the way she said softly, "It's like Modena's bride. Do you know that story?"

"Who was she?" I asked.

"Haven't you heard about it?" she replied. "A woman who wanted to captivate her husband on their wedding night, hid in a chest. No one could find her. Ten years later, her bones were discovered, among the orange blossoms and her veil. Of course," she added, "this is not the same thing. He is the one who wanted to hide forever. Who knows what lay beneath that bridal veil!"

Nana's words frightened me so much that from then on I thought I could never be happy again. The memory of the joy during the wed-

ding celebration brought me the same anxiety and sadness I used to feel when I heard Nana's story about Jane, the Shoemaker's Wife.

Nana used to tell us the story of a woman running away from the husband who planned to murder her in a lonely spot at night. She ran toward the house of her sister, Jane, the village shoemaker's wife. Jane had promised to leave the light burning so the girl could find the house in the darkness.

However, when she thought she had found the light, when she saw it quite near, when she felt sure she had reached it, the light moved inexorably away; and the woman spent the entire night hunting in desperation for the light in the wilderness. The story has no end. All day she ran hither and thither, seeing the shoemaker's light.

"Perhaps some night soon she'll find it," Nana would conclude.

"Oh, I hope it's tonight," I implored. "I hope tonight she'll find the lighted lamp!"

"I don't know what comes next," Nana said.

We used to run all night with the woman through the wilderness, following the eternal lighted lamp.

Today, then, during these hours before the duel, I dare not go to sleep. I prefer to wait upon events.

I shall go on reading my diary, to keep me from thinking.

I looked out toward the street. The wire dress-maker's form belonging to the paralyzed woman across from us was still there. But on the day of the duel, nothing else mattered to me, not even the memory of the paralytic.

The paralyzed woman used to live behind the window on the third floor almost at the corner of Arcos and Sucre Streets—on the street perfumed with nicotiana and lavender. She used to spy upon our siestas constantly, for from her window she could see into the most remote corners of the grounds.

She sewed for the ladies on the block. There she always sat, in her chair, at all hours of the day—fixed, motionless, helpless. While we were playing with our hoops, or hiding among the shrubbery in the garden, while I lay stretched out sleepily in the summerhouse or wandered along the garden

paths, the paralytic used to make signs to me with her hands, or she would shake some object in the air. I never found out what it was that she was showing me behind the glass.

What sort of sinister invitation was she offering me?

"Doesn't she ever leave her window?" I used to ask.

At night I could see her sitting up in her chair; sometimes the moon would light her face, framed in flowing hair, and she would not only beckon from behind the panes, but, opening the window, she would lean out awkwardly toward the street.

I used to hide among the shrubbery while, almost standing in her chair, she would look everywhere for me.

Behind the house, where she could not reach me with her eyes, I would whistle so as to mislead her.

"Don't be afraid; she can't hurt you. She's paralyzed," Julieta assured me.

One day they told me, "You can be glad now! The paralyzed lady across the street is dead."

I got up that morning with one thought in my mind! to go out onto the balcony facing Arcos and Sucre Streets and stare at the window across the way. At first it seemed to me I could see the

outline of her standing upright; later I perceived that her head was no longer there; the wire dress-maker's form belonging to the dead woman was standing behind the window.

"No one wanted to go into her room; all her things have been left in their places, as they were when she was alive," they said.

After that morning, I used to go out to the terrace on Arcos Street every day; I would spend hours motionless, staring at the window across the way, thinking I could see her at night with her hair loose in the moonlight. Doubtless it was the eye of God which I could not escape.

In the late summer afternoons I would run along the garden paths reciting the poem that begins:

When we'd shared the last hours of that day,
And the time came to bid you adieu,
The vague sorrow of going away
Made me know that I loved only you.

Then the wire form of the paralyzed woman in Arcos Street would loom up in the window.

Convalescences always seem very long to young children. They feel as though they had spent half

a lifetime behind a pane of glass, staring at the other children at play in the park; the days pass sadly through the frame of a window.

While I was recuperating from measles and scarlatina—one following directly upon the other—I used to think I would never be well, that my life would always be circumscribed by those four walls; and I realized my only amusement must consist in looking out into the park, leaning my forehead against the glass and distorting my face by flattening my nose against the pane. That particular window did not open on the angel's terrace, but on another which looked toward the lawns and trees. Through it I could see both the paralyzed woman's window and my sisters in the garden—Isabel bending over her frame, embroidering, and Julieta in the wicker rocker, reading and emptying a box of bonbons with equal gusto. I could not read; all the books left within my reach were biographies of saints, the life of The Little Flower of Lisieux and of Gemma Galvani in several editions. It was during those days that I began to devour the Bible. It was a small book with a paper cover. My reading obsessed me to the point where I used to dream of Christ's face; I even made some special puppets representing the Passion. I also imagined

other scenes from the New Testament—the Wedding at Cana, the Resurrection of Lazarus.

During the mass I would read nothing but the Gospel for the day.

My passion for the life of Christ must have seemed too heterodox to Mother. Accordingly, one day my New Testament disappeared from my room. But by then it was too late. My puppet theater kept in its repertoire a harrowing Passion of Jesus Christ. My sisters and I always cried at the moment of the Descent from the Cross.

But everything that has to do with childhood and adolescence is doomed to be forgotten. The showings of the Passion and the Wedding at Cana were soon supplanted by a version of *Blood and Sand*; Mary Magdalene became Greta Garbo or Clara Bow. Only the puppet of Jesus that I made still sleeps in a trunk in the attic.

Jesus was a puppet with a hungry face; I had traced the marks of suffering on it with a black crayon, and the blood with red ink. The cross was of silver; I had stolen it from Nana's oratory. The ceremonies were Mother's silk handkerchiefs, perfumed with Black Narcissus. The two thieves, for no particular reason, were two beautiful puppets. Their hair had once belonged to Julieta and Isabel.

I do not remember now why they were always smiling.

Later, those same faces served in the presentation of a puppet show which I had entitled *Antón Pirulero Butting under the Apple Tree*.

"What apple tree?" asked Julieta.

"The apple tree in the park," suggested Isabel.

"No," I explained, halting the play. "They're imaginary apple trees, silly!"

The apple tree without apples. The one that has never borne anything but a sterile shade cast over the river, said Antón's mother.

Don't look for Antón! shouted a boy with my voice.

Antón is happy, happy, under the apple tree with no apples.

Cric-Crac's mother appeared. (Nana, weeping): *My daughter is lost...my daughter is lost. If I find her, I'll kill her....Antón spends the whole day under the apple tree....What does he see? What is Antón doing under the apple tree?*

Antón is happy, said I, disguising my voice.

You...you....Who are you? Bring them here. A..Aren't you the police? answered Nana, as Antón's mother.

Watchman, watchman, vain and lazy man.
Watchman . . . , came my voice again.

(Enter a man from the pound, with a net in his hand.)

What's going on? Isn't there a dog around here?
Haven't you seen a dog? I want a dog.

You, Mr. Dog—I mean dogcatcher—bring me Cric-Crac. She's under the apple tree with the boy they call Antón el Pirulero, ordered Nana. They're under the apple tree. They've been there two hours.

Don't look for Antón. Don't let the dogcatcher look for him, I pleaded.

Let's shut him up in the pound, interrupted Nana, playing her part. *Antón Pirulero's going to see, that rogue, that adventurer.*

You'll see, you bad, disobedient, reckless girl. . . .

(Enter the puppets Antón and Cric-Crac. A dog is following them. Each time I made him open his mouth, he bit my hand.)

The afternoon is over, Cric-Crac. They've been looking for us three, said Antón.

I don't want you to kill the birds, Antón. Nothing makes me feel sadder than to see the sparrows in your cage, answered Cric-Crac.

What do you know about it? You're a girl.

Where shall we hide Cascarín?

Shouldn't we have left him inside the apple tree?

In our house, "Antón?

No one could find him there. If they take away Cascarín, I'll kill the dogcatcher. (Embracing the dog.) You're not sick, are you, my little friend? Why do the dogcatchers want to kill you? I don't want you to die. I'll find some way to protect you and Cric-Crac. Julieta could not go on manipulating the puppets. She was crying bitterly.

They'll kill us, Antón.... We've spent the whole day under the apple tree. (Indicating surprise.) Why doesn't the apple tree bear fruit this year? And is there no dew on the spider webs? Why are there no worms in the nets, nor water-stars on the river?

See here, Cric-Crac, the time has come. You must know it already. We're old, Cric-Crac. And I must tell you I've lied to you all these years. Forgive me, Cric-Crac. The apple tree has never borne apples. I used to buy them in the market and tie them 'in place so you would believe.... But now, you've got to know. We're grown up, Cric-Crac.

You've got to know that the apple tree bears only shade and not fruit.

I can't believe it. Must I also believe then that you cast the fish in the river, light the stars, and hang up the moon? That the birds have no wings, and Cascarín doesn't love us, and that there are no earthworms in the earth . . . no spiders, no dew? Must I believe all that, too, Antón? That the apple tree doesn't exist?

No, Cric-Crac. Don't cry; I didn't light the stars or the moon. I didn't cast the fish, but I really did hang apples on the apple tree.

No, Antón; no, Antón. I can't believe it. I don't want to believe it. Promise you'll always hang apples on the apple tree.

But you'll know the secret; they're apples from the market and not from the apple tree.

Yes. Yes. But I'll pretend not to know. You'll see; I'll pretend not to know.

Let's go away, Cric-Crac. Let's run away from this town. Right now, with Cascarín. I don't want to be called el Pirulero any more. Let's go, Cric-Crac.

Where to?

To the earth.

But we're on the earth.

This isn't the earth. On the earth, they say, there are no police, no neighbors, no dogcatchers. On the other side of the village, children can dream, and no one will punish them. On earth there is the same peace as in the apple tree. We'll be happy there, Cric-Crac.

Suddenly a lasso made of sewing thread caught Antón and Cric-Crac. (We were ready for tea now, while Nana would complete the lasso and the dogcatcher's net.)

What shall we do now, Antón, Antón? Poor Cascarín! He'll choke to death.

Now you know. If you can escape . . . , under the apple tree always.

Nana said in her dogcatcher's voice: *I've got you, you awful dog.*

I caught you, you wicked good-for-nothing. Nana had changed her voice, and she added happily, exultantly, *I'll give it to you. I'll lock you up; you'll have to scrub day and night.*

Where is that world, Antón? I cried.

It exists, Cric-Crac; it exists. We'll find it yet. You won't see the apple tree in bloom for a while yet.

I'll whip you for loafing and dreaming all day

long. I'll lock you up with the dogs! was Nana's concluding speech.

Good-by, Antón . . . good-by . . . Didn't you really hang up the stars? Didn't you sew the leaves to the trees? cried the puppet Gric-Crac.

No, Cric-Crac. But some day the world will be ours . . . you'll see. And they won't call me Pirulero any more.

"Does it end happily?" asked Isabel.

"Where does all that imagination come from?" she asked me.

I felt myself blushing.

"I didn't write it," I lied. "It's out of a book of puppet plays."

That night I went to sleep clutching my manuscripts in my hands; they believed that I had not written it.

There are days, I repeat, when our past appears naked before us.

I cannot remember ever having seen Mother smile; I felt toward her a mingling of pity and rebelliousness. I had never seen her bend, even when

she took communion. To her, kneeling meant bending her knees while holding her body even more erect. Once, only one time, I was aware that she buried her face in my hair while she wet my cheeks with her tears.

One afternoon, as I was climbing the stairs, I paused in front of the portraits of my grandparents. In passing her room, I heard Mother's voice saying, "I'll never forgive you, never; dishonoring your wife and your daughters! Paloma Bilbao, no less, Paloma Bilbao."

Her sobs left me unmoved, but I was fascinated by that name, Paloma Bilbao. I was not quite sure, but I thought I had read or heard it somewhere. I could not easily forget it.

One day I saw with my own eyes the photograph of Paloma in strange and exotic poses, surrounded by knickknacks and cushions, and she merited her fame. According to the caption under the picture in *Plus Ultra*, a marquis was leaning over her, adoring her.

I could not understand how Father, whose image always appeared in my memory riding in an open automobile waving his hand, or presiding over the dining-room table surrounded by party members, or in his fencing clothes in the weapons room,

could have anything to do with Paloma Bilbao. What could be going on between him and that double-jointed dancer with the somber eyes and the enigmatic smile?

During one of the puppet shows I said to Julieta and Isabel, "I've got a surprise for you."

"As long as it isn't *María* . . ."

"Wait and see," I replied.

I hung an announcement on the door: "Sensational debut today. Paloma Bilbao and her mysterious positions."

I don't know whether Mother saw it; but while I was manipulating a puppet representing Paloma, according to the photographs I had seen in *Plus Ultra*, Mother came in and sat down beside Julieta. I was surprised to see her with us. She seldom left her room, especially during the hour of Benediction.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen, you will see the extraordinary ballerina, the admiration of all Buenos Aires"—I paused, unconsciously—"in her dances," I shouted.

When the show was over, Mother put her arms around me and I knew she was crying because I felt her tears on my cheeks. I forgot that creature, and *María* returned to triumph over Paloma. Julieta

and Isabel said she was the least successful of all my puppets.

Every afternoon Nana used to read in her room, or on the dining-room porch; she was sharpening her memory and her chilling tales with passages from the Old and the New Testaments.

I never knew how those books came into her hands. I acknowledge today her talent in choosing them.

"Ah," she would say sometimes, when we were on our way home from the movies, "Buenos Aires will be punished like Sodom and Gomorrah. That film was a scandal, and at the Ideal, too!" Her attitude of that moment contradicted the one she had maintained throughout the entire show. "The way the women dress! Those skirts! . . . You could see their knees. I don't know why we go out into the streets. We'll have to be prepared, for soon tongues of fire will rain down. Let's hope God will choose us to play the part of Lot!"

"Will He choose Father also?" I asked tremulously.

"Your father will be damned," she said cruelly

"The Angels of Destruction will have no pity on him."

That night, before we had gone to sleep, Nana appeared in our room with a book under her arm.

"Why did God destroy Sodom and Gomorrah?" Julieta asked, as she was expected to.

"Child, it was a city of the gravest, the worst kind of sins."

"What were they?"

"Well . . . , all kinds," she answered. "Corruption. Don't ask any more questions, Ana. Just listen."

" 'Two angels came to Sodom,' " she read.

"Perhaps one of them was the stone angel on the terrace . . . it watches over us."

She made no reply.

"It may happen that some afternoon two angels will come to visit us. We'll give them shelter, like Lot. They'll command us to put our affairs in order and go far away, without looking backward."

"Why don't you read us what the Old Testament says?" asked Isabel. "Perhaps it's amusing, like the Apocalypse."

"No!" I cried frantically. "Not that!"

"Of course not. I'm not going to read you the

Bible today. The same story is in this book; it's a story, a tale; it doesn't matter who wrote it, but it does explain better what the destruction of Buenos Aires will be like; the rain of brimstone and copper, the tongues of fire."

"I'm scared," I said. "Don't go on, Nana," I begged.

"You may as well get used to it, for you're put here on earth to learn all about it . . . all."

"I remember," said a certain Lugones, 'it was a day of beautiful sunlight; the people were swarming like ants, and the streets thundered with vehicles. A day of perfect purity and just warm enough.

"From my terrace I could overlook a vast confusion of roofs, of hanging gardens, a strip of bay studded with masts, the straight gray line of an avenue'—Avenue Alvear, maybe.

"The first sparks fell at about eleven o'clock. One here, another there. Particles of copper like the sparks from a wick; particles of incandescent copper which fell to earth with a murmur like sand. The sky remained as clear as ever; the city noises did not wane. Only the birds in the aviary stopped singing.

"He had noticed it casually,' (the man, the author) 'whilst looking toward the horizon in a

moment of abstraction. At first he thought it was an optical illusion.' " Nana stumbled over that. " 'He had to wait some time before he saw another spark fall, for the sunlight tended to blot them out; but the copper was burning at such a rate that it was visible all the same. A flash of fire, and the soft thud on the earth. Thus, at long intervals.

" 'Upon making sure of it, he experienced a vague terror. He scanned the sky with anxious glance. Its limpidity had not changed. Whence came that strange hail? That copper? Or was it copper—?' "

"Certainly it was copper. How can you doubt it?"

"It's a writer who's telling a story," I said, interrupting her. "It's the destruction of Sodom. He didn't see it; he imagined it I know a poem—"

But they would not let me go on.

" '—A spark had just fallen on his terrace,' " continued Nana, " 'a few feet away. He stretched out his hand; there could be no doubt that it was a granule of copper which was cooling very slowly. Luckily a breeze sprang up, carrying that strange rain in the direction opposite to my terrace. The sparks, moreover, were very sparse. For moments at a time, one could believe they had stopped. But they

had not stopped. One by one, to be sure, but the fearful granules always kept on falling.' ”

“Don't go on, Nana,” I begged.

“This is happening in Buenos Aires, I tell you. . . . There are automobiles and everything, as you can see. The author is an Argentinian. He saw it all himself, like a vision, or he was told about it. And I know who told him,” she said stupidly. “It was a friend of mine who sees visions. He told it to your friend, Lugones,” she said, speaking directly to me. “Don't you know the Lord will no longer tolerate what is happening in this Babylon? Don't you know there are millions of sins committed every night? In one house alone, a house lighted with red lamps . . . and in those cubicles and dance halls on the waterfront, and in that house of women that caught fire last month. Don't you remember it? And now I shall go on, so you'll learn to behave yourselves: ‘That afternoon and all that night the spectacle of the city was terrible. The people fled, panic-stricken, from their burning homes, only to burn to death in the streets, in the devastated countryside; and the people suffered barbarously, weeping and wailing, and dying by the thousands, in every conceivable way. . . . The collapse of buildings, the burning of all kinds of goods and effects,

and above all, the blazing bodies, added the torment of an infernal stench to the cataclysm. At sundown, the air was almost black with smoke and clouds of dust. The little tongues of flame, which had danced in the copper rainfall that morning, were now evil conflagrations. A very hot wind came up, thick like burning pitch. It was like being in an immense dark oven. Sky, earth, air, all were gone. Nothing remained but darkness and fire. Oh, the horror of that darkness which all the flames, the enormous blaze from the burning city, could not dispel; and that fetid smell of burning cloth, of brimstone, of corpse-fat in the dry air which made one spit blood; and those screams that seemed as if they would never end, those screams that drowned out the roar of the fire, vaster than a hurricane, those screams when all the brutes howled, groaned, bellowed in their mute fear of eternity!’ ”

“No more, Nana! No more!” I screamed frantically. “God would not permit it; He couldn’t.”

Father’s presence in the doorway put an end to the story of the destruction of Buenos Aires.

Very early one morning we were awakened by the fire sirens. We had not heard them until they

passed our house. Then they stopped, quite near us.

I could hear people shouting: "There, around the corner, around the corner!"

Nana came into our room and said, "It looks as though a house is on fire, there around the corner. I wonder if it's the Valerias'? They have a fireplace."

Julieta and I jumped out of bed. Isabel went back to sleep; she refused to come with us.

Very few people were stirring. It was barely six o'clock in the morning. Suddenly Nana said, taking us by the hand, "Let's go home. It's not the Valerias'."

"What difference does it make whether it's there or somewhere else?" I asked.

A woman went past us and said to Nana with an ironic smile, "They'll all be doing a pretty dance now that they're all going to be fried. The devils! It's a good thing; they'll be getting a taste of the fires in hell."

"Let's not go home; I want to see a real fire," I said.

"So do I," added Julieta.

Nana insisted that we must go home; yet her feet kept moving toward the scene of the fire.

Women were running out into the street in their dressing gowns, smoothing their hair, and among them were some half-dressed men.

"If your mother finds this out, she'll kill me," said Nana.

We approached the spot where the fire engines had stopped, going up as close as possible.

A wisp of smoke was coming out the door of the house—a house with two balconies adorned with black marble and jalousies. Several women came out one by one through the smoke, as if someone were pushing them, all laughing heartily. Most of them were wearing colored, flowered kimonos with uneven hemlines. Their lips were painted, and each of them carried something in her arms—a big jar, a powder box, a cage, or a dog.

The women standing with us screamed at them, "How about it? How do you like hell now?"

"Bitches . . . !"

"Where are you going now? . . . Trollops!"

"Something caught fire."

"They left a lamp burning."

One woman was sure the fire had been caused by a curling iron.

"Don't you want to stay in bed at this time of day?" they kept shouting.

Nana forgot all about us and began to talk with the woman beside her.

Not all of them were wearing flowered kimonos. One wore a beautiful band of pearls around her forehead, and a dress embroidered in jet. She was smoking with a very long cigarette holder, and at the same time eating a piece of bread she was holding in her other hand. She laughed with everyone; especially the firemen.

“To hell with that one,” shrieked a woman.

“How about it, girls? Do you like the heat?” they kept repeating.

They looked as though they had stepped off a magazine cover, or from the lid of a candy box, or an advertisement for Black Narcissus or Drops of Love.

“False alarm,” someone shouted.

To my joy, I noticed that the wisps of smoke were gradually dying down.

“No, don’t go in yet,” they shouted at the women, who kept yawning as if they had not slept all night.

“It’s lucky for them that it happened at this hour,” said Nana sourly. “They’d finished their work.”

“What kind of work do they do?” I wondered.

"They're so beautiful! They don't look like working girls."

Only one of them, the one smoking with a long holder and eating a piece of bread, stood out from the others. All her teeth were gold; and I could not agree with the names they were shouting at her—witch; procuress.

When the man came along with the pastries flavored with orange blossoms, they began to spin the wheel of fortune on his cart and to laugh. And they finished all the pastries. The man was pleased; he would not have to work Barrancas Square that morning.

The smoke had stopped completely. The firemen began to coil the hoses, and went off laughing and promising to pay the girl a visit soon. . . . The women went into the house, taking leave of the people with peculiar gestures. No one answered; I think now that the onlookers felt defrauded because the fire had not made an end to them and their house. The spectators would probably have to wait until the destruction of Buenos Aires by brimstone and copper, like Sodom and Gomorrah.

"Sinful Buenos Aires," cried Nana. "I can hear the horsemen of the Apocalypse. Can't you hear their hoofbeats resounding in your ears?"

The terrace of the angel was mine. It was separated from the other rooms in the house and could be reached only through Julieta's and my room.

Julieta never went out on it. She used to say, "It makes me dizzy"

There were other places in the house that I alone used to frequent—the balcony above Sucre and Arcos Streets and the wisteria-covered summer-house. What hours I used to spend, as a child, lying on the warm stones; lost in watching the journey of an ant or the circling of a fly! I doubt that I was ever thinking of anything serious; I used to let myself be carried away by daydreams, and I probably lived in a constant twilight state. Sometimes they used to tell me to come down from the moon. I was not precisely on the moon, but in the spot where I had left the ant or the fly like ghostly heroes. How many cloak-and-dagger plots were born during those summer siestas! How painful to awaken and have to go into the house or attend Catechism classes! How could I awaken without my heart fluttering?

They used to say to me, "That will soon go away; it's your age."

And so it was; during one of those siesta times I crossed the threshold of adolescence at one step.

I felt such shame through my whole body that I hid behind the weapons room all that day. I wanted to die so no one would notice the change in me, and I feared that all Vicenta's threats and prophecies had come true, and that the things I used to love would soon cease to interest me.

Perhaps in line with what Mother and Nana had hoped, I had begun to be bored with those long siesta hours in the grounds, with my solitude and the flight of the flies. For the first time, I sensed the lassitude of hours that will not pass, and I even failed to go to see *Blood and Sand*, through which I had discovered the long novel. I spent hours wandering through the house, staring from the balcony above Sucre and Arcos Streets to see whether the paralyzed woman across the way had come back to life.

"I, too," I said timidly to my own reflection in the windowpane.

There are days when we suddenly notice how our hands have grown, how our chests have filled out, or how our legs are lengthening.

"You have calves to your legs now," Vicenta said to me one day.

That morning I had noticed when I was getting out of bed that my legs no longer looked like a rag

doll's, and that my ankles seemed more slender. However, it was not that my ankles had grown thin during the night, but that my calves had grown.

"Now the rest of it will come," I thought with terror.

The rest was what I had guessed about Julieta and Isabel—and what Vicenta had forced me to see in the others. Yet it was not that which frightened me most; rather, it was those clothes designed to conceal or reveal, as the case might be.

When my sisters used to go with Mother to the corsetière's, I would stay in the car, reading my missal. I must have seemed absent and serene. However, I was intent upon planning some way to halt my development. I think now that that was the saddest time in my life, when I tried in every possible way to stop growing. I could not understand why my sisters felt proud of their busts and of the rounding of their hips.

One day I heard that nuns bandage themselves so that in time they succeed in flattening their outlines. I believe that what I feared most was that others might notice the change in me, and that Mme. Palmés, resting her knot of hair on my chest, would cry, "At last, we've become a woman!"

Then I would have to go with Mother and my

sisters to the corsetière. Later, like them, I would spend the return trip to Belgrano talking immodestly about what I had just bought. Consequently I was happy when I saw that I remained thin, almost like a child, and that I need not imitate them. Neither did it concern me, until that Friday of the duel, whether I wore loose frocks and my hair tied up in colored ribbons, instead of short and pulled back at the temples.

That afternoon I realized that, with my shapeless body and tied-back hair, I could never be the heroine of the duel. Then I longed to let my growth, hitherto held back by fear, burst forth. I was dominated to the point of desperation by a desire to be like the heroines in novels or films. How could anyone discover me amid the furniture, the curtains, the nymphs and Arabs on the ceiling? No one knew me, except the paralyzed woman across the street, or Julian, or Vicenta. However, as I gazed at myself in the mirror that afternoon, I felt that someone, behind me was foretelling mysterious happenings. I feared nothing so much as that my life might be like Mother's and my sisters'.

Nothing serious could happen to me. "Every-

thing that is to come," I used to think, "will completely bury my past."

Why was I thinking of the Valerias that afternoon? The Valerias were the only girls who stayed in my memory! They used to go to Barrancas Square in the afternoons, wearing deep mourning and gray or black aprons. They wore long curls, like candy canes; they laughed boldly through very red lips, with eruptions around the natural outline as if they had always just finished eating raspberries. Their eyes were black, and they were always laughing and talking to one another in asides. One day they said to me, lowering their eyes, "I bet you don't know what we're talking about."

Silence.

"Tell us, are you innocent?"

"No," I replied, misunderstanding their meaning.

One afternoon they gave me their response. At first I thought they were talking about one of the pictures they had seen on the walls of my house. Later I understood that it was something factual, precise. The elder of the Valerias, her upper body nude, had fastened two oranges in a kind of belt and had put them on either side of her chest.

"This is what you'll have before long," they said.

I felt that my legs were buckling under me; I hid in the grass, waiting, with bowed head and hands crossed over my breasts. I was not sure whether I was waiting for them suddenly to grow, or whether I was holding back their coming growth with my hands.

After that day I began to bandage myself in secret.

I have always wondered whether we ourselves create situations or whether they create us.

That morning Mother had tried by every possible means to rent a car; we did not have our car, and we wanted to make our usual Friday morning rounds, after taking communion at Las Victorias Church—the endless fittings with Mme. Palmés, lunch at the convent, and later the movies. We girls would have liked to wait on corners and change taxis constantly. Julieta placed herself on the corner of Libertad and Charcas Streets, while Mother remained in the pastry shop. But later she changed her mind, thinking it better to be with us. It seemed

strange to me to see Mother waiting on a corner for an unfamiliar automobile to come along. Then a taxi stopped, without waiting for us to signal, and the driver hailed us with an impudent gesture.

Mother got in, frowning slightly. In spite of this, however, she suggested that the driver remain with us the whole day.

After a long and detailed conversation, she agreed to the price and arranged for him to wait for us at each stop along our itinerary. We had gone only a few blocks when it occurred to me to ask why there were crocheted curtains on the side windows of the car and partway across the back window. The driver turned around with a slight grin on his lips; Mother pretended she had not heard the question. I amused myself with the design on the curtains—two chubby angels with a trumpet. After we had gone several blocks, the man answered me.

“Not everyone wants his face to be seen, and not everyone spends the day between communion and the convent.”

He turned around and added, “I haven’t made this trip for a long time. The things a driver sees! And hears, too! And the places he goes to!”

"No one asked you anything," interposed Mother. "We're not interested."

"Very well, madame," he apologized.

After a silence, he asked again, "Wouldn't you like to take the girls for a ride through Palermo before you stop at the first Station of the Cross?"

Mother did not deign to reply.

The car began to roll along to the strains of "Over the Waves," which the man was humming, almost shouting, interrupting himself with wild bursts of laughter.

"Please," exclaimed Mother. "Stop . . . we'll go no farther. . . . Have you lost your mind?"

"A little fun never hurt anyone, madame."

He went on singing and gliding along, making S-curves through the streets and avenues.

"All right, all right . . .," and he suddenly put on the brake, as though impelled by a spring, and remarked, "Forgive me; I have to laugh to keep from crying, you know. It looks like my wife might be expecting her fifth child. Perhaps I can make her get rid of it."

I failed to understand the significance of that remark; but the effect it produced on Mother startled me. She gave a faint moan of horror, and

replied, "Mother of God, what are you saying? That's a crime . . . a crime!"

"What can you do?" he said. "Would you like the kid to starve to death?"

Mother took from her purse a small memorandum book and before our astounded eyes wrote the address of our house and handed it to him, saying "Come and see me; I'll help you. There are institutions to take care of everything. If your wife has to work, they'll look after the child. . . . But, please, don't commit that crime. The child is already one of God's creatures."

At that moment we reached the house of Mme. Palmés. Mother said as she stepped from the car, "Don't go away. Wait for us, please."

"Who does the man want to kill . . . ?" I asked.

Isabel, more sensible than Mother, observed, "Wouldn't it be better to let him go? He acted like a madman, don't you remember? And he seems to be always on the point of hitting something."

"No," Mother insisted. "I must save him."

Two hours later, when we came out of Mme. Palmés', the man was waiting for us. He greeted us, happy and smiling; and, putting away the pocket-knife with which he had been cleaning his finger-

nails, he said to Mother, "I was beginning to wonder about you. I almost left."

We got into the car. I sat next to the crocheted curtains again; I kept nervously rolling them up and down, making the angels in the design fly with my maneuvers.

After a long silence, the man asked Mother, "You're half nun, aren't you?"

"What foolishness are you talking?"

"I mean, the way you dress. You all look like novices. The kind that marry God."

Isabel sighed. Mother said, "If there were more people dressed like us, and not with the immodesty of these days, things would be better. . . ."

"How right you are, madame! So you're going to help me bring another kid into the world, are you? Listen, if you don't. . . ."

"For heaven's sake!" Mother interrupted him. "When we go back to Belgrano, I myself will write a letter to the president of the institution. God must have sent us to you today to save a life."

We reached the convent. As we were getting out of the automobile, he said good-by to us with a wink.

I was not sure whether that man amused or ter-

rified me. I was not interested in the conversations he had carried on with Mother; only one thing concerned me: why did the taxi have those crocheted curtains, with angels and trunpets? And who were the people who drew them in order not to be seen?

No sooner had we finished our lunch than Mother, her mind filled with the taxi driver, forgot her usual chat with her sister and took us off to the movies.

"I want to go back to Belgrano early tonight," she said.

The man was waiting for us in the same attitude as the first time. As I passed him, he said, "Too bad; she's such a pretty little thing."

I didn't grasp the meaning of his insinuation, but his words slid over me like something viscous and burning.

"To the Ideal now," Mother said.

"Why don't you go to see the film they're showing at the Hindu? *Male and Female* . . ."

"Would you take your children to see that picture?" Mother answered.

"Why not? They have to learn what life is all about."

"Very well," said Mother. "That is your opin-

ion. . . . You have a great deal to learn, my friend. You'll soon see how the Society will guide you and your children along the road to good."

The man started to whistle "Lady from Spain."

After a moment, Mother said, "This is not the way to the Ideal."

"It's early, madame. Wouldn't you like a little drive through Palermo?" he asked again.

"Unless you take us straight there, we shall get out," cried Mother in annoyance.

"Don't get mad. It's all right! It's all right!"

He turned the car, and without a word took the road to the center of the city. Mother looked out of the window, preoccupied. The man began to sing, and without any warning, drove into the gateway of a house, laughing boisterously and startling the doorman under a red lantern above the half-open door dimly illuminated by a flickering light. Our cab went out through another gateway parallel to the first, and our man shouted impudently, "That's where you ought to be; you ought to spend the day here instead of in the convent. Tomorrow you'll see, you'll see; we'll burn you! Tomorrow is our day! Hurrah for the first of May!"

Mother started to scream . . . Isabel and Julieta were moaning with fear. After leaving the gateway,

he put on the brakes suddenly and said to us, "Here's where you get out . . . hypocrites . . . saint-lickers . . . exploiters of the poor!"

Mother kept saying incoherently, "I'll call the police. . . . You'll see . . . I'll call a policeman, you criminal."

But he was off in a flash without even giving us time to react.

Mother put herself to rights; a little man, coming out of one of the doors, said, "Do you need any help?"

"We never ask the devil for help," she answered.

And taking me by the hand, she ran to get away from the house and the curious bystanders who stared at us in astonishment. Julieta and Isabel followed us.

We never reached the theater that day; instead we went back home to Belgrano in a streetcar.

Alone in my room, I took out my notebook and wrote:

Today I saw the most beautiful house in the world. It has two gateways and its entrance looks like the Tunnel of Love in Japanese Park. Inside there was a door, with some bronze statues beside it holding up two dimly lighted candelabra. Mother said it was hell: but the driver, even

though he was crazy, said we ought to live there. I think it must be a wonderful ice-cream parlor with an orchestra playing waltzes, and wonderful chocolate cakes. They probably show pictures with Vilma Banky and Ronald Colman at times. And only beautiful, young people can go there; not like Paris, which sometimes, especially in the morning, is full of old women dressed in black.

Everything in the park seemed asleep during that siesta time before the duel. Occasionally the call of the ice-cream vendor could be heard, or the man who sells pastries containing fortunetelling slips of paper, or the little fellow who used to hawk cotton candy—the one we called “Chou-chou.” He sold wads of spun sugar in all colors—pink, yellow, and green. I preferred not to go near him and I would buy my candy through the window grille. At that time, I was afraid to go out into the street alone, because of the gypsies. Nana had told me they were looking for me. At times they used to climb up on the grille and make signs to us to come out. Nana said they had come to get us to dance with the bear, and they would carry us off with them for good. She said it to frighten us. I think now that she herself used to take everything she said seriously.

Mother believed the gypsies had no souls and lived like animals.

Apparently, she was not mistaken. The children used to climb the sperr-tipped fence on Cuba Street, just like monkeys, Isabel and Julieta would run to them to have their fortunes told according to the lines in their palms, and they minded not at all showing their petticoats as they were climbing the bars.

I would not let them read my palm; I preferred the future to wait for me like a stranger.

But one night they caught me through the bars of the grille and one of them, seizing my left hand, said, "I see a man's face; only one, nothing but that man."

She began to cry bitterly and said she did not want to continue the reading because she was about to bear a child.

I did not understand what she meant, and I was happy all afternoon because the gypsy had seen a man's face in the lines of my palm. That face appeared before mine the night before the duel, although for only a moment.

The face she had seen in my hand was Pablo Aguirre's.

Through the hours before nightfall, I was

dreaming. I was thankful it was December and we had not yet left for Adrogué farm.

Early in the summer, after school let out, we used to go to The Poplars. The Adrogué house had belonged to Mother's family.

The approach to the doorway was up a wide stairway guarded by two bronze Negroes holding a candelabra in each hand. The Negroes with their blue turbans contrasted with the pink of the walls and the grilles at the windows. The garden surrounded the house on all four sides, and beyond it the park stretched to the base of the mountains. The park held a dark lake, filled with fish and insects. A careless litter of branches, the remains of birds, and dead leaves covered the earth. There was also a fountain where elves bithed, shooting a cascade of water through their mouths. From my room, at night, I thought I could hear them laugh, but the creaking of the old ropes in the swing drowned out their laughter. On the terrace there was a greenhouse. The rosy pines of the skylight refracted a magical light on the walls, covered with ivy.

In the afternoons, we used to practice archery in front of the house, near the Negroes guarding the

stairway. We always hung our bows on them at the end of the afternoon, and there they stayed forgotten until the next day.

The walls of the house were hollow; ancient passageways had been converted into closets for trunks and the clothing of other seasons of the year. Things stayed there forgotten, impossible to find; another hidden life went on behind the walls. The hanging dresses carried the scent of mothballs and evoked a world beyond time and season. While everything in the garden was flourishing, while the wisteria crowned our foreheads, the wire forms, draped with woollens and furs, held heavy overcoats and top hats jammed down to the temples; in the winter, on the other hand, they displayed their naked, truncated forms, covered with nothing but old summer clothes. Shadows, too, seemed to be stored in the closets.

When Aunt Paula died—an old paralyzed creature who never left the house—we were taken to the other end of the grounds and told we would see her again in another life. The following morning, we were aware of the funeral cortège leaving; we could hear the horses' hoofs echo through the greenhouse. I watched its departure through a broken pane in the pink skylight and felt no grief.

I could not imagine her dead. It seemed to me that she was hiding behind the walls, in the closets, waiting for the coming seasons, like one of the forms dressed in our cast-off clothing. Paula would wait. "Perhaps she is waiting now behind these walls to be born again," I thought, "in the soul of the wire forms, and when the doors open for her return to life, she will look funny, naked in the winter and bundled up in the summer."

I used to imagine that the dead in my family were like Modena's bride, the woman who, according to Nana's yarn, wanted to surprise her husband on her wedding night by hiding in a chest.

He had not understood his bride's wish to spend a moment among the shadows in order to be rescued by him. Ten years later her bones and her wreath of orange blossoms were found.

"Why don't we shut ourselves up like her?" I thought, "and put an end to the shouts of the elves in the park, the Ferris wheel, the merry-go-round, the voices, Nana, Mother, and my sisters. *Why not be a dress form, or bury one's self like the woman in Modena's castle?*"

Each time I opened a door or entered a room, I was carried away by the notion of emptiness behind the walls, the scent of mothballs, the loose heads on

a single foot; and those buried members of my family, all awaiting a mysterious rebirth.

That afternoon I failed to hear even the pastry vendor and the man who sold cotton candy.

Everything appeared to drowse in order to give play to my memories.

Pablo Aguirre? The name sounded like a name in a novel, and the mere fact of speaking it aroused in me a strange commingling of modesty and shame. Vicenta would have laughed at me and said salaciously, "I'll bet you like him. . . . Is he your sweetheart? Do you want him for your beau?"

Vicenta was always thinking of such things, and she always said the thing that would hurt me most. Nevertheless, she fascinated me. She embodied all there was to know about the rest of the world; I associated with her the frightening prospects of becoming a woman—like Mother, Nana, Julieta, and Isabel.

One time she said to me, "Wouldn't you like to be a nun? You wouldn't? Then you'll have to learn all about everything. They're showing a picture called *Birth* in a movie theater on Corrientes Street. We're grown up now. We ought to find out about

everything . . . shouldn't we? If you want me to I'll tell you about it, or maybe your mamma will take you to see it some Friday afternoon."

I don't know why Vicenza was Judas, but she was. I always associated her with Judas after the holiday for the visit of the Mother Superior.

They had me dressed in a white tunic and a gold sash; my hair was parted in the middle and powdered to lighten its dark chestnut color.

"It's the Lord, the Lord!" cried the nuns surrounding me, over and over again, as they rushed hither and thither like members of a ballet troupe.

I looked at myself in the mirror: I saw my pale oval face, my blue eyes, and that half-formed body ashamed of its outlines.

"You're to be the Lord quieting the storm! The tableau will be called 'Jesus Calming the Waters.' Now we must choose the Twelve Apostles. This will be the most marvelous of all the acts."

"And who will play Judas?" asked the nun who kept the wicket. "Judas was in the boat, too, wasn't he? Wasn't he there, too?"

Their faces fell; after a moment they said, "Yes, he was."

Now it became a question of choosing him; and the role of Judas fell to Vicenta as though there could be no doubt, as though it could not be otherwise.

Vicenta used to sit behind me. She had round, close-set eyes and wore her hair parted in the middle.

It was unfair to choose her, I thought; her face was too obvious; treachery had been written on it from birth.

But she accepted the role, satisfied and pleased with it.

On the stage, my aunt, María José, the drawing teacher, had created a remarkable *mise en scène*: the boat was of cardboard, like those used in photographs taken in amusement parks, where one needs only to show his head to appear seated in an airplane, or with a fat woman's body, or on board a transatlantic liner. It was somewhat similar to that. But my boat moved. By some mysterious device, that piece of cardboard lurched against the background and gave the spectators the effect of movement. I played the part of Jesus, my body outlined against a cardboard heaven, and the upper half of the Apostles' bodies appearing above the boat. The

nuns ran about, marveling at such an ambitious piece of staging.

"What about the waves? The sea?" Vicenta asked.

In truth, there was no sea. And no cardboard could take its place.

But the inspired and energetic stage designer asked for some first-grade children and some canvas from the sacristy. No one dared cross her. The little girls started coming in like lambs to the slaughter.

Thus the sea was created. The white cloth was held up by its four corners, and the little girls rolled on the floor, imitating the motion of the waves.

"A miracle!" they cried.

Vicenta and I dressed in a cold classroom two hours before the performance. We had orders not to let anyone see us in order not to spoil the make-believe. We were not allowed to sit down, either.

We stood, one in front of the other—I as Christ, and she as Judas. Our hair was curled and our eyes were made up. They had hoped to change her for the better, but they had succeeded only in emphasizing her moral turpitude by putting a name to it.

"You're not Christ," she said to me. "Anyone

can see right away you're a girl. Look at yourself . . . look at your body. . . . I'm Judas, and I look like him. . . ."

Vicenta, Judas, gave a low laugh. . . . After a silence, she added, "This business of dressing us up as men amuses me. What if we were to take it seriously, or the way *they* do . . .," she said after a pause, staring at me fixedly.

"Who do?" I asked.

"They . . . the two little doves. Haven't you ever seen them along toward evening? After the Rosary is when they love each other the most. That's why they put them in separate rooms."

"What do you mean?"

"They think they can go on all their life as if they were. . . ."

"There's no such thing; it's one of your lies," I answered indignantly.

But something obscure and at the same time obvious silenced me.

Meanwhile, Vicenta went to the blackboard and began to write my name joined to hers by the possessive "de."

We were called on stage. Our tableau was to last a quarter of an hour. We took our places—I above the boat, blessing the water, Vicenta at the

other end, smiling at me with the ironic grin that was the forewarning of treachery.

When the curtain was rung up and I listened to the applause, my heart began to pound. Then came a respectful silence. Only the giggling of the little girls under the canvas could be heard. When they collided they caused a great turbulence of the waters.

A quarter of an hour, motionless, with the eyes of the Judas on me, piercing through my robe. I think that only the tremulous anxiety of my Aunt María José sustained me. I stole a glance at the orchestra pit; the chaplain looked to me like a fat old woman. Frightened at my own almost sacrilegious thoughts in my role as Jesus, I started to cry. And as though my tears had been seen, the applause drowned out the laughter of the waves.

The curtain came down. The background, the boat, and the waves all fell flat on the ground. But it no longer mattered.

I shall never forget that voice at my side which said, "You have visitors in the parlor."

Still dressed as Jesus, I crossed the courtyard and the corridors. At the entrance to the parlor I paused at the scent of chocolate and caraway cookies which came from within. My sisters and Julian were there.

I threw myself in his arms almost before I'd seen them and pressed my chest to his; the powder in my hair rubbed off on his chin.

Later I talked and talked until I was worn out, but I never stopped looking at him. It did not matter to me that Julian might laugh at me, at my disguise, as he called it, or my meager body; and he said again, as often during the summer months, "You're a little bit of a thing; you still have four more years of school."

When he left he gave me a silver medal which he, like all visitors, had had to buy from the sister at the wicket. I hung it around my neck.

Until the night of the duel, my cousin Julian was the only man I had any chance to meet.

Close beside me, Vicenta was receiving congratulations on her portrayal of Judas.

There she was, ready with all her sly tricks. She used to appear, unsummoned, substituting with her extraordinary knack vile and terrible words for the Gregorian chant. Her talent in that field was such that she found the needed words even in Latin. From morning to night, she concentrated her whole soul upon teaching us the mysteries of life, as she called it. Nothing could stop her. Even in crucial moments, she never forgot that she was a self-

confident and dedicated teacher. Each year she grew more skilled; each year her repertoire of books, pictures, jokes, and stories expanded. And we had to listen to her; if we tried to ward her off, she was implacable; she thrust pictures before our eyes, spoke frightening and insistent words in our ears: "You don't know anything yet!"

Even now I can hear Vicenta's voice speaking that "yet," and I think I shall go on hearing it until I die.

On the afternoon before the duel, however, I was confident that from then on, Vicenta's voice, and she herself, would finally be buried like the statue of Apollo at the end of the park at The Poplars.

It was in the summer of 1924. Nana had left for The Poplars a day before us.

"There are many things to take care of," she said.

But we knew those things were the statues; she had to dress them; to conceal them. There was a profusion of statuary set in the park. A small Dan-

ton, seated in a chair, was reading a book open at a sentence which said: "Purity is the wealth of the soul." There were also a Mater Dolorosa, a William Tell, and a statue of Justice. Then there were others, the ones that had to be dressed. I could never explain to myself the reason for the groupings; those covered with canvas before our arrival were nude. They all seemed to have been sculptured by the same hand, which had lingered pleasurably over the delineation, in excessive, detailed ugliness, of the parts Nana covered up. Neither do I know why they were not removed from the park. I think now they were left just to be covered the day preceding our arrival, in order to teach us what we should not see.

We set out for Adrogué loaded with bundles. They handed me a sewing kit, a kind of cretonne bag, in the bottom of which lay an immense tablecloth, already stamped, which I had to embroider before the end of my vacation.

I sat on top of it and began to read my missal, which was covered in gray paper so it would look like any other book and not a breviary. I scanned the Psalms with my eyes, without reading them. I was hoping that someone on the train would say, "She loves to read; she's different from the others."

But my cousins and Vicenta, who had come with us that summer, would not leave me in peace. The boys were practicing with their slingshots from the windows of the train. The girls chattered breathlessly and complained constantly because our parents had not taken us to Mar del Plata.

As I said, Vicenta had come with us that summer. She was fixing a slingshot with that same naturalness with which she told us how we were born; or how and why our parents had not come with us.

"Mar del Plata is not for children; *they're* much better off at the farm," mocked Vicenta.

At the siesta hour we lay down beneath some medlar trees while our cousins erected barricades for their fights with the young hoodlums next door.

One afternoon Vicenta said to me, "Why do they dress the statues in duck when we come? We already know all there is to know."

"That isn't why. They're grown up now," said Julieta, referring to the statues. "They're in their twenties; that's why they're covered."

"What have you got to lose by looking at them? Someday we'll be in our twenties, too."

"Look at them? How?"

"By taking the covers off, stupid," said Vicenta.

"They'll punish us; the coverings are fastened too well," I said.

"We can't lose by peeking."

We watched her crawl along the ground, come to the statue of Diana, the Huntress, lift up the duck which served as a skirt, and come back to us.

"Bah!" she cried, deflated. "What did they want to cover that up for?"

"What did you see?" I asked.

"Nothing new," she answered. "It's a woman; and you can't see the upper part of her because she's dressed."

I raised my eyes and noticed, perhaps for the first time, that Diana's breasts were covered with a kind of quiver in which she carried her arrows.

"That's nothing," said Vicenta. "At the end of the park, behind the stables, there's one that's fallen down."

"But it's a man," I said, lowering my eyes.

"No; it's a faun, a demigod," she answered, to quiet me. "An Apollo," she corrected herself obsequiously.

"Let's go see it," suggested Julieta and Isabel.

We followed Vicenta. The statue of Apollo was lying on its side, among the leaves, as though buried there.

Vicenta started to laugh and to scatter leaves over the parts which, according to her, Mother did not want us to see. I seemed to recognize that stone face lying on the earth with parted lips and half-closed eyes.

"I'll bet you won't kiss it," said Vicenta in my ear. "I bet you wouldn't dare kiss it."

I dared. I put my face down to it. Then I halted at the coldness of the marble.

What terror went through my mind! Perhaps a premonition of the Friday of the duel.

I fled precipitately as if the Apollo were following me to take me in its arms and enclose me forever in the rigidity of marble . . . both of us to be forgotten there at the end of the park among the dead leaves.

"Where are you going?" Julian stopped me by dropping at my feet from the branches of an apple tree.

He loomed in front of me like the statue suddenly come to life, as though he alone had the power to save me.

I raised my head. I went up to him and kissed him as though he were the Apollo.

Then I ran and hid in the stables; I thought he was chasing me.

That night, when I went back to the house, I could hear Vicenta's voice from the porch, telling the story about Julian amid bursts of laughter.

"On the mouth, I tell you it was on the mouth. I could hardly believe it. . . . Where can she be? She must be too embarrassed to come out."

The next day I went back to Buenos Aires with Nana. When I got on the train I sat on the sewing bag, opened the missal, and read what was on the statue of young Danton: "Purity is the wealth of the soul."

Apollo was buried in the park; Julian can laugh, but not the Apollo. I cannot forget his laughter.

That man who dozes until daybreak in an arm-chair in a club nowadays is my cousin Julian.

Until the night of that first-Friday duel, his was the figure that walked arm-in-arm with me in my imagination through the paths of a garden while I recited:

Slowly, beside me, clasped close to me, pallid and still,

. . . .

. . . .

And the two became one
and cast a single shadow
and cast a long and single shadow.

I used to see myself with him, mounting to the terrace of the angel the better to watch the moonlight on Cuba Street, above the house, above our hands.

Today, when we go to tea at the Paris, he scarcely knows me.

"Ana! Ana! . . . How we have slept, we two. I don't take drugs, I swear it," he goes on disjointedly. "I've worn myself out sleeping; I sleep, I'm always asleep. I like to wake up and see you beside me. I keep seeing you in the role of Christ, as you were that Sunday."

He breaks off. He, too, is one of the phantoms who seize hold of me on Friday nights.

I went back to Buenos Aires with Nana, as I said, but after a few days everything was forgotten, and we returned to Adrogué.

Those summer days took on the slow rhythm of all childhood's holidays. I used to awaken each morning with new hope, but by midmorning I felt it dissipate in a pervasive boredom. The hours were marked by the dragging of a stick along the walls of the arcades and the indifferent comings and goings of an ant. The long siesta through which the

summer days seemed to drowse at Adrogué farm was occasionally broken by the shouts of my cousins fighting with the neighbor boys; or by some filthy insult spoken through the teeth, followed by a voice saying, "Be careful. . . . The girls are over there!"

The division between the sexes was so sharp that at times when the toughs assailed our barricades, we girls spent the entire day in the house with our embroidery and our reading.

One afternoon we suddenly heard the piercing cry of an animal.

We went to the open window behind the grating, not daring to go out on the balcony. The cry came again, more sharply. Our cousins ran about while Julian uttered crisp orders.

"Put her in a box," he said, "and fix it like a bed."

The others—his brothers and the neighbor boys—were laughing senselessly among themselves, their faces twisted. The screams grew louder and seemed almost human.

"It's the cat," said Vicenta beside me. "Her time has come," she added. "Don't you remember reading in the Bible, 'The woman who is in travail is full of sorrow, for her hour has come'?"

My cousins placed the box almost in front of

our eyes. They glanced at us from time to time, and one of them said, "This is to teach you. Your turn will come."

The cat kept crying, more softly now, almost enjoying her own pain.

"Let's help her," ordered Julian.

We remained motionless behind the grille.

One of them said, "I can't help it; I'm going to throw up. . . ."

He went running toward the cistern.

The others squatted on the ground and surrounded the box. The cries became sharper again. Then came a broken, flutelike sound. The outcry was so mournful and piercing that the windows seemed to vibrate.

"At last," said Julian. "You dirty cat! Only two. . . ."

"Wait," said another voice, "perhaps there will be more. . . ."

One of the boys, without any prompting, brought a bag; they put the newborn kittens in it. Julian was in command. All the others followed him to the cistern. They threw the creatures into it, one by one.

Later they went back to their fighting with the hoodlums as though nothing had happened.

We went back to our sewing. Vicenta started

one of her stories about birth among the animals and ended by saying, "Imagine what it must be like to come into the world, to be born. . . ."

To keep myself from fainting, I recited a poem under my breath; actually, I was trying to pray.

Suddenly I felt against my neck the wire edge of the greenhouse window, as on that other occasion.

That hot afternoon I had taken refuge near the bed of ferns; I had brought a sheet to the greenhouse on the terrace and I spread it on the ground to lie on. I was dozing in that half-light amidst the heavy perfume of the jasmine bushes. When I first heard my name and the laughter that followed, I thought of running up the spiral staircase and hiding in my room.

I recognized the voices of the tough boys next door.

The call was insistent. I climbed on some wooden stands which held the begonias and thrust out my head.

One of them said, "There she is."

I had never realized the side terrace was so near.

"Ana pavana banana."

"How old are you? . . . What are you doing perched up there like a bird?"

They laughed, holding their hands to their faces and sticking out their tongues through their fingers.

I did not answer; they had never dared to accost us for fear of punishment.

"What are you looking at? . . . Why don't you come down . . . come and play with us? Haven't you got a tongue?"

I kept still, trying not to hurt my neck against the pink panes.

"Come out of there. . . . Can't you see we're going to strip naked? Do you want to watch us?" asked one of them.

They opened a little box they had brought with them and began to snicker salaciously and mockingly.

"Yes," said one of them, the one who held a fishing pole and was wearing a straw hat down to his eyes. "If you want us to, we can show them to you right now. . . . Look," he added as if he had discovered something transcendental, "we'll reach it up to you on the pole. We'll put it on the tip. Do you want to see it?"

The others immediately grasped his intention and began to empty the box. They picked up the fishing pole and one of them said, "Give me a string. Tie it on here."

"That's it. Now . . . look. Let's see how you like it, Ana banana."

A picture was tied to the tip of the pole. Climb-

ing up the balustrade, they held out the pole which they could bring close to the greenhouse without any trouble.

The four boys were hanging on its approach, and they waited with wide eyes for me to see the picture. I looked at it for a moment and then said loudly, "I can see that every day . . . and much bigger than this one, in a frame. And I saw the real thing, too . . . in the museum, just as it is."

The boys, feeling cheated, began to laugh and jump about.

"What do you mean, just as it is? Can't you see it, stupid? Take a good look; it's a naked man and woman. How do you like that! And they're in each other's arms. How old are you, banana?"

After a slight pause, I replied, "I'm eleven years old, and what I'm telling you is the truth. I saw that picture . . . and you can see it if you want to. It's down in the dining room. It's called 'Pure Joy,' and it's by . . ." I tried to remember the name of the artist who had painted the woman with the heavy belly; but I could not. I seemed to have talked too much.

"Aha!" said one of them. "You think you're smart. We'll soon find out if you've seen this one before."

The pole and the picture disappeared. I followed the movements and the gestures of the boys, who had opened the box again and were rummaging inside it.

"Let's see if you've got this one in your house," they said.

They laughed loudly and climbed the balustrade again, trying to place the pole nearer my eyes.

"Look! What do you think of this one now?"

I saw before my eyes a grotesque representation of a half-naked man and woman. At first I thought the two people were playing a game on the bed; but I soon realized there was something shocking in the game, something furtive and sinister. Yet I could not take my eyes off the print.

The terrace with the lions began to waver in front of me; suddenly it disappeared as if I were left hanging in air.

"Have you seen this one anywhere, I say? . . . What do you think of that, Ana banana? Stupid! Now you're going to see another one . . . and another. . . . You can stay hanging there all night."

But when they took down the pole in order to show me the next one the wind carried away the print, which caught on a spearhead of the garden fence.

"Now look what you made us do! What if they come after us?" said one of them.

"They'll put us in jail," another shouted.

"Or they'll hand us over to the Jesuits."

"Make her get it. It's your fault... you shouldn't ever have kept it. If we catch you in the street, you won't live to tell the tale."

"Listen, you!" said the eldest of them. "You come down out of your nest and get it for us. If you don't, we'll ring the bell and tell your mother everything."

"Everything!" they shouted. "And we'll tell her the picture belongs to you and your sisters. Bitches!"

I obeyed. I withdrew my head from the window, trying not to scratch myself; I climbed down off the stands and started to cry. Meanwhile, I heard my name called softly and cautiously with a hidden threat. They were throwing stones at the greenhouse panes. I do not know how long after, I got up and went running down the stairs so as not to be seen. I ran to my room. Every ring of the doorbell, every footfall which passed in front of the door made me tremble.

When it was dark, I went down to the dining room and hid behind the curtains to scan the side

of the house unseen. Suddenly I caught sight of the faces of the four boys behind the grille; upon seeing me they commenced to make threatening gestures and to point to the place where the picture had fallen. Something stronger than myself impelled me to open the window and jump through it into the garden.

"If you don't get it, we'll ring the bell," they said softly.

"Hurry up—banana!"

I was not listening. I climbed the fence and with a great effort succeeded in getting the picture loose, bruising and scratching my hands on the spears as I did so.

When the toughs saw I had it in my hand, they ran out of their hiding place and fled through the rear of the park.

I climbed through the window again and suddenly came face to face with Father.

"Ana, what are you doing, climbing through windows?" he said; then, taking me in his arms, he added, "I came to get you and take you to the city with me. Sometimes I like to have you all near me."

I began to cry; whether from joy or fear, I scarcely knew.

Suddenly I saw Julieta coming, eating a slice of watermelon.

"Do you know," she said, lying down beside me, "they're saying¹ that Aguirre is coming to dinner tonight. Papa said we're to sit at the table; he wants Mama to be there, too. . . ."

"He wants us? Me, too?" I amended. "I'm to sit at the table?"

I jumped up and down. Never had I dared to dream that I would have dinner with them. His last supper, perhaps.

"What are you so happy about? You don't even know him."

I lay down again on the canvas². There was nothing to do but wait.

I waited.

At the end of the park, between two apple trees, a board held up by two ropes was swinging. I went out through the back of the house so my sisters would³ not see me; I was running away from those long, repetitive, malicious conversations in which they were always trying to decipher the signals made to us by the young hoodlums next door.

I sat down in the swing and twined one of my braids in the rope. I was tracing circles on the

earth with my foot. When I got up, the swing continued to move without the weight of my body. I imagined one of the elves in the garden was pushing it; at night in my room I could hear the creaking of the old ropes. On stormy nights the swing lashed furiously to and fro, light without the weight of my body.

I was twisting my hair in the strands, as I have said. I never used to try to swing very high; I would let myself rock, tracing circles in the earth with my toe and winding my hair in the cables.

The house, the lawn, and all the well-known voices would vanish then; nothing could hurt me while I rocked in the swing. I myself would cease to exist. I think now that the times I spent in the swing and on the merry-go-round were the only hours of my childhood when I belonged completely to myself. I used to think eternity must be nothing more than to swing, while my foot kept tracing indecipherable symbols in the earth.

Moreover, the swing was mine. I cannot remember ever having seen anyone in it. It was abandoned like the statue of Apollo. One day I found my cousins and the neighbor boys placed in strategic positions to watch my skirt fly up in the breeze.

"Why don't you swing higher? That's no way to swing," they taunted. "Are you scared? You act like a little kid."

I made no reply, but continued impassively to twine my hair in the rope; they started throwing wads of paper at me.

As we were having dinner that night, my cousins passed me a drawing which showed a swing holding a little girl in braids with her petticoats showing.

Vicenta came to me with a book under her arm. She was wearing the expression characteristic of her important moments. I recognize the Old Testament at once.

"Here's the Bible," said Vicenta.

What Nana had read us that night about the end of the world had come from a section of that Bible. As soon as I saw the book I tried to get up, and said firmly, "If you're going to read that part about the end of the world, I'm going."

"Don't be foolish. Do you think the Bible has nothing in it but the end of the world? If you only knew all the things it says. . . ."

Isabel and Julieta drew near.

"Why don't we go down to the basement? It's

so hot up here. No," she corrected herself, "that's dangerous. If they find us in the basement, with the Bible, we'll catch it," said Isabel.

"Why shouldn't they find us with the Bible? It's the book of God, isn't it?"

"You'll see," I said.

"We can lie down under the pear trees, near the statue of Apollo, as far away from the house as possible."

"If someone comes we'll have to hide the book," said Julieta.

Vicenta squatted on the ground with the book in her lap. She was uncomfortable. She changed her position, and the four of us, lying on our stomachs, heads together, listened to her.

She began to read in an insinuating voice.

" 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine. . . . ' "

Then, mumbling the words quickly, she said, "I'm reading this way because this part's not interesting," and then she went on, " 'A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts.' "

"Isn't that pretty?" she asked with a sweet smile. "But now get this. . . . "

"Is that in the Bible?" I asked.

“‘In the morning sow thy seed,’ ” she preached.
“‘The beams of our house are cedar, and our rafters
of fir.’ ”

She went on, slurring the words softly.

“‘Why don’t you read it all?’ ” I asked.

“‘This part isn’t at all interesting, I assure you . . .
‘His left hand is under my head and his right hand
doth embrace me.’ . . . What do you think of that?
‘You can imagine what that is . . . what it means.’ ”

“‘Who are they?’ ” I persisted.

“‘You wouldn’t know: King Solomon and his
beloved. I mean his mistress,’ ” she said. “‘And now
you’ll see what *he* says to *her*: ‘Behold, thou art fair,
my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast dove’s eyes
within thy locks; thy hair is as a flock of goats . . .
Thy teeth are like . . . Thy lips are like a thread of
scarlet, and thy speech is comely; Thy two
breasts . . .’ Well . . .” She paused.

Everything was still; the water faucets, the
smothered laughter of the boys next door, and the
yawning of Nana coming out of her room.

“‘Listen now,’ ” she went on. “‘Listen. ‘Thy two
‘breasts are like two young roes that are twins,
which feed among the lilies.’ ”

No one made any comment. She continued to
read in a low voice, skipping words. Confident in

the sureness of her choice, we did not interrupt her.

"Well," she said, after a moment, "I can't say this out loud."

She put the book in front of our eyes. We read it and returned it to her.

"How about it?" she asked. "In the Bible, too! And now: 'How beautiful are thy feet with shoes, O prince's daughter! the joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of a cunning workman.' And now, just to show you he was looking at her naked, stark naked, I'll go ahead: 'Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor: thy belly is like an heap of wheat set about with lilies. Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins ... Thy neck is as a tower of ivory ...' and she proves it when she says: 'His left hand shall be under my head and his right hand should embrace me.' "

She paused, and then went on: "Now listen carefully to this, Ana; it's for you: 'We have a little sister, and she hath no breasts: What shall we do for our sister in the day when she shall be spoken for?' "

She closed the book and hid it in the grass. Then making herself comfortable, she said, sententiously, "They didn't leave out a thing, did they?" After

a pause, she added, "Poor Ana. If you don't get fatter, I mean if you don't . . . the two roes . . . nobody will love you. No one. You've just found that out. In *Plus Ultra*, there's an advertisement for some kind of pills. I cut it out. Take my word for it, we'll never get married if we don't take them." She went on animatedly, "What will you bet those two were living together? I'll bet they weren't married." But he does say some awful things to her. Not at all nice . . . are they?" she asked indifferently.

None of us replied. Julieta had fallen asleep on the ground, and Isabel was daydreaming. Vicenta came to me and whispered in my ear: "Don't worry about your breasts . . . about the two roes . . . *Plus Ultra* says those pills are infallible. Besides, you're young yet. Do you want me to go on reading?"

"No," I said sadly. Lying face up on the ground, I rested my head on my crossed arms and watched the clouds pass before my eyes. But the day was too beautiful for there to be clouds in the sky. Perhaps I saw my tears which I dared not shed for fear that Vicenta might see them.

She continued to read beside me. She would give a low laugh and look at me from the corner of her eye from time to time.

Her bursts of laughter, her half-uttered words

were worse than any possible story of King Solomon and the Shulamite.

I dared not look at my body stretched out on the canvas under the voile dress. Vicenta's voice and her reading of the Song of Songs was still ringing in my ears. But on the Friday of the duel, there was no time to pity myself.

Before starting his vacation at The Poplars, Julian had asked me, "How can you stand her? Is she fish, flesh, or good red herring? I don't know her very well—but I'd much rather she wouldn't come with us this summer."

Yet neither Mother nor Nana opposed that friendship. I believe now that Vicenta was their deputy.

Only Julian could not bear to be near her.

Julian was the only one whose name I used to speak when I was alone, until that day of the duel, on that first Friday. And in one way or another, he was there to dispute the mournful evidence that the world was still turning around me.

It pains me to speak of Julian; I should think of him as one who no longer lives, one who has never lived. The Julian of today, the one who has tea

with me some afternoons, is not the Julian I kissed at Adrogué farm, when he dropped at my feet from a branch of an apple tree. Neither is he the same one as on that afternoon of cold and hunger. Never can I remember, to have felt both so intensely. Corpus Christi Day, with its procession, was the most important day of the year to us. We girls were all positive that someone was anxiously awaiting each of us as we passed through the streets, and that a single glance would enable us to endure the months of being kept indoors. I was reciting softly to myself:

It may be that one day we'll stand face to face,
It may be we'll learn to put off all disguise,
And when that chance comes, if ever it does,
Shall I learn of sighing, will you learn to sigh?

I was saying how well I remember that afternoon of Corpus Christi Day, always associated with hunger and cold. They had made us march through the patio from ten o'clock on in the morning. We were to occupy the most privileged spot in the Plaza de Mayo that year. The intense cold bit through my garments, and I thought it would wipe me off the face of the earth; that God had turned His face from me.

When the main door opened and we went out into the street, my one thought was of the moment when my eyes would meet Julian's; I was afraid he might miss seeing me among so many people, and I took a place at the end of the line on the side toward the street. Vicenta followed me. I did not mind having her beside me, although for a moment I was afraid her ugliness would cast a shadow over me. But as we went past the glass in a door, I noticed that, on the contrary, my own beauty shone brighter. I was ashamed of that thought; at that time I felt sure I would never be able to talk about Vicenta to anyone. Her evil was too obvious, too terrible to need pointing out.

"I want to walk with you; it's the last procession in which we'll march together, in uniform. Besides, I have something awful to tell you!"

When Vicenta announced that something was awful, it was best to be prepared; that day I turned around to face her and said, "You won't be able to tell me anything new; I know everything."

"Not this, I bet; you can't even imagine it. And I'm going to walk beside you—or, rather, behind you."

I failed to hear the last words. However, when I turned my head I met Laura's glassy eyes. Laura

always seemed to us to have spent the whole night without sleeping. Sometimes we would not see her for long periods of time; then she would be back, always paler, sadder, more silent.

"Do you feel all right?" I asked her impulsively, taking her arm.

She nodded her head in assent.

We were filing through Paraguay Street to Cerrito, singing our school songs and the hymns we had sung all year, in which Vicenta often substituted filthy and sacrilegious words.

I forgot the cruel insinuation she had just made; I had ceased to care about Laura's presence. I was looking for Julian's face among the crowd. I no longer felt hunger or cold; I was the protagonist of my own dreams, and I was remembering with a twinge of sadness that this would be my last year as a marcher.

As we were singing the *Tantum Ergo*, Vicenta murmured in my ear, "Did you notice Laura? She looks like she's going to faint. Imagine!"

I made no reply, but kept looking for Julian.

"If you knew what I know. And how I found it out! I won't tell anybody but you."

I went on praying; we had begun the litanies by that time.

"They didn't see me," she continued. "They were in the offertory with the door closed. I'd gone there to call the night woman. She told it to her sister, the one in Division B. It was the last time she went out. She's losing it now."

I don't know how I managed to keep walking along beside her, calmly singing the litanies. I dared not turn around to look at Laura, either. Vicenta devoutly resumed her intoning of the prayers.

I could not believe Vicenta's words; yet they were too precise and shocking to be doubted. I wanted to cry, and I hoped the earth would open beneath me and swallow me forever. And I wanted to hurt Vicenta and never see her nor hear her again. When we reached the Avenida de Mayo, Julian was there on a corner with my other cousins. As I passed by in front of him, he said, "Smile. It's no sin to smile."

I had waited months for that moment and yet I could not smile.

When we reached the Plaza and knelt down near the main gate, I heard Laura sobbing miserably.

"Why are you crying?" I asked.

I was questioning her in the hope she would give me an answer which would refute what Vicenta had maliciously hinted.

But Laura replied, "I don't feel very well. . . ."

"Do you want me to tell the sister?"

"No, for heaven's sake," she said. "I think I'm going to faint, it's so cold. . . ."

I took her arm and said to her, "Follow me . . . there's a pastry shop over there."

We threaded our way through the crowd at the moment of the Elevation when everyone's head was bowed. We went to a confectioner's which stood on the corner of Victoria and Bolívar. I found some money in my uniform pocket and, feeling responsible and adult, I ordered a cognac and two hot chocolates.

Afterward, we took a taxi, without a word said, like two accomplices, and went back to school.

Everyone believed our story, that we had got lost. Vicenta alone smiled; but this time she said nothing.

The park was slowly awakening from the siesta. All about me I heard the jets of the fountains gradually come on and the water began to shoot into the air in intermittent spurts which fell with a syncopated rhythm in their echoing from the park.

"Well, we're getting started," I thought. "The siesta is over."

From the house came the sound of china ringing against silver.

"Are you still there? What's the matter with you? You look like a dead thing. It's time for tea . . .," said Julieta, holding out her hands to help me up.

I got to my feet without looking at her; picked up the canvas and the pillows. My movements were slow and languid.

I folded the canvas, looking at Julieta from the corner of my eye to see whether she was noticing. I left the pavilion among the wisterias, the park, the fountain as though I would never see them again. Only two hours had gone by, yet as I lay stretched out on that sheet on the tiles, surrounded by the perfume of the jasmine bushes, the rocking swing, and the monotonous outpouring of the fountain which had suddenly stopped, I had watched my whole life unfold.

"They say Aguirre is very good-looking . . .," said Julieta.

I made no reply. Nevertheless, I felt the beginning of the blush aroused by the kisses of the actors in the moving pictures.

I forgot that Julieta was walking beside me and started to plan how I would put up my hair. I looked at my thin and formless body under the light dress. A short time ago I had passed my sixteenth birthday. Soon Mother would be looking me up and down and saying, as though recognizing me for the first time: "Pasita Almada's boys are exceptional. So serious, so . . . religious. They are members of the Pilar."

It frightened me to think that I might sometime be united, even though only in Mother's thoughts, with the sons of Pasita.

After tea, I was absorbed in making a tour of the house. Talking to myself and pretending to greet imaginary guests who were now moving about in the living rooms, as on holidays, or as they did at my sisters' coming-out ball, held for me a strange charm.

The fountain began to play, sending a cascade into the air as though a mysterious hand had opened the faucets. The water was raining over the marble slabs, on the heads of the cherubs, and on the statues of Dianas and nymphs. Everything was getting ready for the important event. But it was still several hours away.

On the day of my sisters' coming-out party I was happy, hiding behind the marble balustrade on the second floor.

I can still remember them descending the stairs with pearl circlets on their heads, their belts down to their hips, their skirts very short, their lips faintly rouged in secret with colored paper. I was glad not to be a part of all that coming and going of guests, who had invaded the garden and the parlors, dancing ridiculously, moving their feet and clapping their hands as if playing a trenzadillo.

From that night on, I remember, they seemed increasingly strange and distant to me; as if someone had taken them away from me forever. I realized with terror that some day I would be dancing the Charleston in the arms of those men dressed in black, like funeral attendants or chimney sweeps. "How much better," I thought, "if they wore light colors—blue, pink, like the gentlemen in that picture: *Imprudent Wives*."

I foresaw that some day I, too, would become a part of that world, and as I peered from behind the stair rail on the second floor, I seemed to be watching myself.

"I've seen enough," I decided, and went up to

the storeroom. I took out my puppets which had lain forgotten in the bottom of one of the trunks. They were made of sticks and cloth.

That night all^c my gesures seemed false: I pressed the puppets to my breast, and yet I could not manage to forget that they were only cloth and sawdust, and I was aware that something stronger than they was pulling at me and would not 'let me resurrect' them.

The dance for my sisters was still going on. I wanted to take another peep at what was happening in the parlors of my house. For the first time, the grown-up world was attracting me to it. Indeed, I foresaw the end of my childhood. The thing that most distressed me was that I had sensed an alienation from extreme youth as I pressed the puppets to me. For the puppets had been the grand passion of those days.

Father had even taken me one day to see the 'Trilusa' puppets when they came to Buenos Aires.

Nana had dressed me in a white frock with a pink sash and several starched petticoats. Father and I sat in the back of the Crosley on the cover over the folded top. He hailed his party members with a presidential wave of the hand as we passed

in front of the party headquarters on Hidalgo Street. I was thinking of all I would have to remember when I had come back home that night.

As I said, my own puppets had no wires. We manipulated them with our hands. I used to dramatize the stories and novels I had stolen from my sisters. They did not mind as long as I made a play of their reading.

They would sit on the benches in the weapons room. Nana was included in the invitation. I set up the stage in a niche. The best of all my plays was a version of *María* by Jorge Isaacs which made my sisters weep disconsolately. Sometimes I could not go on with the play because it was interrupted by sobs; especially in the scene where the dying María says good-by to Ephraim.

One day Julieta said to me, "If you ever do *María* again, don't count on me."

The puppet which represented María was very beautiful. I had made it look like me, with hair cut from my braids, and eyes the same color as mine. Ephraim looked like Julieta.

I never invited Vicenta to those shows. When I started going to the cinema, I used to reproduce what I had seen, cutting out the love scenes. I dared

not let the puppets kiss each other. One day, at the end of *The Road to Yesterday*, Nana shouted, "Let them kiss! Let them kiss!"

I could not do it. The puppet which took the leading man's part was the same doll that played María.

But how I was waiting for night. I began to glide through the parlors of the house to the unheard melody of "Valse Bleu."

A mysterious orchestra hidden on the terrace of the garden was playing it. How beautiful the marble and the opalescent glass of the display cabinets seemed to me! I could see myself in the Saxons, in the Gobelin tapestries, in the porcelains. I was the lady multiplied in the curtains, the miniatures, and the ceiling. That woman would be able to stop the duel at dawn, with her beauty.

"During that afternoon hour, I managed to believe that I was the cause of the duel—that two men were fighting over me.

I was not bold enough to go into the dining room, which was to be the scene of the coming supper; events would outstrip my fancies.

Suddenly I heard quarreling voices. I went up

the stairs and halted before my parents' door. For a moment I was afraid that Mother might have prevailed over Father. But in the middle of the argument, Father began to hum "Golden Hair," while she burst into desolate weeping. No doubt about it, the duel would take place at dawn, at four o'clock, as they had said. The quarrel began again with lowered voices, as in the morning; but little by little they grew louder, then Mother was laughing and crying at the same time.

"I won't forgive you this time."

"The girls are going down to dinner."

"Never—"

"I command you. Do you think they can go on being hypocrites like you? You've done them enough harm already. Are they my daughters, or aren't they?"

"Never!" insisted Mother.

The quarrel was so bitter and breathless that I began to be afraid for Mother.

"Your family has all kinds," he said, after a long silence. "Nuns and the others. . . . Don't tell me María Celia isn't having fun enough for all of you there in Paris."

"Which one did you marry?" asked Mother indignantly.

"Neither of the two, unfortunately," answered Father. "María José is lovely, even after so many years of continence!"

"That's a sacrilege," answered Mother. "You'll go to hell. . . . After tonight—"

"No, don't say that word . . . it's a sin. Remember, what God has joined together let no man put asunder, or something like that, isn't it? Why don't you consult your prime minister, Nana, that ignorant . . . that stupid, that old, old woman."

"You'll go to hell," Mother kept crying. "I'll consult Celina! I want a separation! There must be some way, some way, some way!"

I thought of Mother and my Aunt Celina. She was Sister María José now.

Unconsciously, I recalled that November night at school.

Our Aunt Celina, Sister María José, used to come to undress us at night and she would bless us, making the sign of the cross with her thumb on our foreheads.

"Sleep well, Ana, I'm here," she used to say to me. "Call me, tell the night sister, if you're afraid."

I used to sleep peacefully; I believed that Celina was watching over my slumber.

But one November night I awoke with a start; I felt smothered in that closed room. Everyone was asleep; I jumped out of bed and looked out onto the balcony. The moon was peering through a thick mantle of fog and clouds, lighting with a single ray the cistern in the patio; the clock, was striking midnight, slowly as usual. Suddenly I heard faint, muffled laughter coming from the terrace. I was frightened. It seemed like childish laughter from beyond the grave, as though it were coming from a children's cemetery. Nevertheless, an overpowering curiosity drove me up the steep, narrow spiral stairway which opened from the terrace.

What I saw startled me so I thought I would faint. The first one I recognized was Aunt Celina. She was whirling in the middle of a circle, with her shaven head and a full nightgown like all the others. One by one I identified them. In spite of the heat, the humidity, they were running like madwomen, and the moonlight made the atmosphere heavier. Not all of them were shaved; one—I could not recognize her—was combing her hair and approaching dangerously near to the empty

street. Another, the youngest of them, was serving a transparent liquid in thin, delicate glasses. Later, I realized it was *anis*.

The ones playing in the ring paused, from time to time, to drink from other fine crystal glasses which stood on a filigree tray.

There are times when I think that night never happened, and that Aunt Celina was not in the dance. However, as I was going down the stairs I caught my nightdress. I was afraid I could not free myself and they would find me when the dawn came.

I felt so sad and forsaken that I woke up Julieta; I lay down beside her, but as the heat was so great, I put a pillow on the floor beside her bed and fell asleep there. In the morning, the first thing I did was to climb up to the terrace. I expected to find them stretched out on the ground.

The terrace was in shadow. The tiles still retained the heat from the preceding day, and the silence made the night warmer.

We were summoned to mass. I went down the stairs cautiously and entered the church. There they all were. None of them took communion; their heads were bowed so low their foreheads almost touched the kneeling benches. Occasionally, a

merry, stifled hiccough could be heard in the silence.

"You'll go to hell," Mother kept shrieking.

I wanted to hear no more and I went up the stairs slowly to my room.

"If only I had a red dress," I was thinking, "and a plumed hat like Mother's sister's, the one who runs a fashion shop in Paris. Perhaps it would somehow help Mother's prayers. Everything would come out as in those photographs in *L'Illustration* or *Cosmopolitan*; two men in white shirts and black trousers, crossing swords; in the background a lady, in a carriage, weeping behind a black veil, like Mary Astor in *Don X, the Son of Zorro*."

I shut the door to my room. The moon was shining on the terrace of the angel. The curtain would soon rise on the last act of the day. I looked out on the terrace, and remembered how the angel had lost its nose. The anarchists had knocked it off with a stone one First of May.

They came down Cuba Street from the north, shuffling their feet in time to "The International." The women were carrying their babies in their

arms and the men were brandishing hammers and sickles. The shuffle of their feet resounded from the walls of our house and made them shake to their foundations.

"It's the Antichrist," shrieked Mother, kneeling on her prayer bench.

We stood motionless behind the curtains so as not to be seen.

"They're aroused by the shooting of Sacco and Vanzetti," they said.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Harmless dupes," they told me.

Suddenly the singing broke off and the shuffling feet halted in front of our house. Mother prayed faster. There was no sound but the rattling of the Rosary in her hands.

"We'll have to call the police," said Nana, taking me roughly by the arm.

After a silence, they climbed the fence of the park and began, between laughter and blasphemies, to throw stones at the terrace of the lower floor.

It took me a few moments to grasp that they were stoning the angel. I ran recklessly to my room and as I opened the window, Father stopped me.

"Are you mad?" he said, pulling me against him.

"They'll go on by; don't worry about the angel."

And so it was. The laughter dissolved into a

kind of weeping and lamenting. They started to shuffle their feet again and went away.

I rushed out onto the terrace. The angel had lost part of its nose and some of its fingers. It was filthy with mud and some sort of red fluid; to me it seemed to be bleeding. I brought a pail of water and began to wash it, from a ladder. I truly believed that it was bleeding; I did not see the tomatoes on the ground.

No one paid me any heed when I said the angel had lost its nose; the events of the following day kept us all busy.

Father took steps to defend the party headquarters on Obligado Street. And Mother worried about the Church.

"Just like Mexico!" they kept saying.

"Sinners. . . ."

"Antichrist, the end of the world!"

I stared at myself in the mirror. There could be no doubt I would never be the lady in the carriage. I took out my notebook and wrote in agitation:

At dawn there will be a duel at the end of the park. It's now eight o'clock in the evening. I'm frightened. Julieta will soon come to let me know

that Pablo Aguirre has arrived. I'm waiting for him; I've been reliving my past, day by day. I'm waiting for him, I repeat; I'm no longer afraid. I know this is the most important night of my life. I am glad there will be a duel at our house, even though I know it is a sin. I shall have to confess it. . . . I must think only of him. Perhaps tomorrow he will be dead; but today he is going to have dinner with us. I shall sit at the table.

I wish I looked like Mother's sister, the one who lives in Paris; I would dress like her: short skirts, faintly painted lips and a band of pearls on my forehead, like the ones worn by those women who came out of the burning house.

Perhaps if I go down tonight dressed like that, Pablo Aguirre will be able to guess that I've thought about him all day. He will think I'm a child and that I don't even know what a duel is. Of course, if I went down dressed like that, Mother wouldn't let me sit down at the table, not for one moment. I don't believe that in these clothes (how right Isabel was!) anything could happen to me; yet there is a voice that keeps saying to me: "This is the most important day of your life."

Ah, if only he will speak one single word to me during dinner. . . . I don't know; I can't think any more, I'm very tired, as tired as if I'd spent the whole day shrieking out my confession in the Plaza de Barrancas, like the people in the Salvation Army.

I went down to the garden. On the balcony over the park, the one facing on Arcos Street, I waited for the arrival of the afternoon paper. I dared not buy *Crítica*—we were forbidden to have it in the house—and I timidly asked for *La Razón*. A picture of Pablo Aguirre was on the front page.

I folded the paper as if Pablo Aguirre himself had surprised me. For the first time I realized then that I was face to face with my own daydreams. Pablo Aguirre was photographed in that afternoon paper: overcoat collar turned up, arms folded, hair wild. I thought someone had put that photograph in the paper on purpose to make fun of me. Beneath it, I read: "This flashlight picture of Pablo Aguirre was taken in La Recoleta Cemetery, on the anniversary of the burial of his fellow party member Penaloza." I hugged the paper to my chest. I thought I could divine some subtle invitation in the glance of those small, sharp eyes. However, I thought I would never be alone again; I had chosen a man.

"What are you doing?" asked Julieta at my side. "What have you got there?"

How could I explain to Julieta that it was only a newspaper I was hiding against my chest? . . .

"The paper," I answered, and started to run.

But she caught me, and, wresting it from my

hands, she said, staring at the photograph, "What a character!"

She had defined the photograph, vulgarly and grotesquely.

I took the paper from her and swore never to speak to her again; at least not that day.

I closed the door of my room and cut out the photograph, which I glued to a page of my diary with yellow paste. Beneath I wrote the following poem, omitting the verses which were not pertinent to me:

He's tall as he walks by, look at my man.

Don't look at his mouth, lest it burn you.

Don't look at his eyes, lest they freeze you to death.

When he strides over the plains, the river bed trembles,

The shadows in the woodlands are changed to light,
And the beasts cower before his darkling air

When they meet him—proud, toying with a gun.

He loves "a woman," he is master of his fate,

Death will come for him in the spring

And find him crowned with vine leaves, amid fruit
and vine.

But my own "loving" hand will erase his glory,

Where his steel was wont to ring, he will move in the
beating of wings.

Julieta came again to look for me. Her entrance had finally closed a chapter in my life, I thought, and I could no longer hold back the future.

"He's here," she said. "He's in the library. Papa wants us to come down at once. Why were you hiding? I wasn't trying to take him away from you."

Isabel joined us. I let them go down ahead of me. Father was standing at the foot of the stairs, Aguirre behind him.

"My elder daughters," he said. "Julieta, Isabel, this is Pablo Aguirre. A brave man," he added in a pompous tone. "And this is Ana, the youngest."

I raised my eyes as far as his tie, but ventured no higher. My gaze stopped at his chest, as if a large circle, the duelist's target, surrounded his heart.

"You must excuse my wife; she will not be dining with us," said Father.

But perhaps in the hope that her presence might ward off a fatality, she came down to the dining room. . . .

"I'm glad," said Father softly.

"My wife . . . Aguirre . . . , a brave man," he said, again changing his tone.

"We have conceded nothing; I've already sent

for the seconds," said Father, defying Mother's glance. "Dr. Peralta will be here at three."

Aguirre did not seem to be listening. He was busy staring at me as if he could not see me.

"We'll hold an arms vigil, if you want to rest in the guest room. It's hardly worth while to go back to town."

"Don't worry about Esquivel's two killings. It isn't easy to be killed in a duel. . . . That's all a myth."

All during the meal, I could observe him at my leisure. When he was not staring at me, I studied his profile and the triangular shape of his chin. His high collar reached to his hairline in back. And a frown occasionally darkened his forehead; at such times his scalp moved.

I did not venture to raise my eyes. When I felt his stare fixed on me, I lowered them the more. Then all I could see were his nervous hands, crumbling a piece of bread.

Father's voice came to me as though in a dream.

"We make no concessions," he went on.

"I am not worried about dying," said Aguirre. "It would be enough for me to know that others will follow my example and that accusations cannot always be made with impunity. An ignorant people flung to the jeering of such charlatanism,"

he said disjointedly, without taking his eyes off me.

I grasped the fact that I was face to face with the first person who had ever directed his conversation to me. I hardly know how I managed to remain facing him at the table, without having to invent the situation. There, before me, was a man with a triangular face and small, sharp eyes, who was enveloping me in his voice and his glance.

"Have you considered that you may be killed?" asked Mother.

Father glared at her. "Politics is not an art nor a game these days, señora. Honor is more important than the thought of death."

"What about your soul? What if you kill Esquivel?"

"My wife is a very religious woman. I don't know why. There are all kinds in her family. She is bringing up the girls. If they had been boys, things would have been different."

Pablo was not listening. I felt his stare fixed on me. I pushed back my hair and smiled at the servants waiting on table so he could admire my smile. My only fear was that my blushes would spread to my neck.

How I hated Mother's voice when she said, "The girls may be excused."

Isabel and Julieta obeyed, indifferently. I folded

my napkin and slowly pushed back my chair; I raised my eyes to his, which had been following all my movements.

"This is the fifteenth duel; it's more than five years since we've had one in the grounds," Father was going on.

I went up to Aguirre and made a little curtsy without looking at him, and ran from the room. I went to my own room. I undressed. Julieta was already in bed.

"He's young, too young to die," she said sleepily.

"They don't all die in duels; some survive," I replied.

"This one is to the death. I feel it . . . like the one with Labourdette . . . you're too young to remember." She knelt on the floor with her Rosary in her hands.

I lay down on the bed, under the white mosquito netting. I felt smothered, I could not breathe; the room and the bed were swaying dizzily. Only the mosquito netting remained in its place.

"How would you like a dress of mosquito netting?" I asked Julieta.

"'Blessèd art thou'—" she answered. "Can't you see I'm saying my prayers?—'among women.' Don't interrupt me; I can't stop. 'And blessèd . . .'"

I knelt on the bed and draped the netting around my head like a veil in order to make Julieta laugh, but she did not pause in her prayers.

I jumped out of bed from under the netting and opened the windows. Julieta muttered incoherent words between her prayers.

The moon was outlining the terrace; the angel looked like a bat. I looked out at the park and saw three men come through the gate on Cuba Street. From my hiding place behind the balustrade, I heard Father's voice receiving them.

"At last!" he said. "Everything is ready. We're holding an arms vigil."

The hooting of an owl drowned out his voice. I went back to my room; the angel's shadow was thrown on the terrace window. The sound of the water in the fountain came through the other window. I think it made me drowsy. I scarcely heard Mother's voice when she opened the door and said, "Pray for him—for them," she amended.

Later I heard steps in the guest room. I waited. I was caressing the scapulars of the Virgen del Carmen on my chest and I crawled out of bed. I opened the door of the room, trying not to awaken Julieta, and slipped along the corridors to his room. I knocked on the door. To justify myself, I pre-

tended, that he failed to answer because something had happened to him. I opened the door. Aguirre was standing with his back to me, looking out at the park. He turned with a start, and came to me with an assured stride. I hurried to open the neck of my nightgown and—as if to explain my presence—I took out the scapulars and on tiptoe hung them around his neck, passing them over his head.

"Forgive me," I said, and I lied. "Mother sent these to protect you."

"Thank you, many thanks," he replied, smiling.

I stood there beside him. I could not turn around. Then it was too late. For an hour I tried to defend myself. I never once thought of crying out. I struggled desperately, knowing my downfall in advance.

Thus I was shortening for him the time remaining before his death.

I fell on the rug. I barricaded myself behind the solid baroque feet of the bed; I wrapped myself in the brocade bedcover and hoped he would find me again. When I felt the yellowing family portraits whirling around me and Vicenta's voice dying away, I cried out, remembering Mother taking communion that morning with us behind her. Again I heard Father's voice as he was getting

ready for the duel. I could then scream without their hearing me.

It was a cry of pain, of hatred, and of pride. I got up as best I could. He remained stretched out on the carpet. I opened the door and closed it again without looking backward. Slowly I went to my room and lay down on the bed to wait.

At four o'clock, I heard steps descending the stairs, and then, the same steps rustling through the dry leaves in the park. I clenched my teeth to strengthen my wish—for his death.

Two shots came simultaneously. . . . Julieta awoke with a start.

"God help them," she said and forgot to ask me where I was going.

I flew down the stairs like a ghost. I crossed the park and came to the dueling ground. I saw no one. I knelt on the ground beside the man who had fallen; they had already covered him with a dark cloth. I uncovered him with a jerk, and verified with horror that it was not Pablo Aguirre.

Beside me Father spoke. "Have you gone mad? We'll talk about this later. In your nightgown, no less. . . ."

I raised my eyes to Aguirre's, not hearing Father. Aguirre put his hands over his face; he

must have seen a boundless hatred in my stare.

The things that happened later are unimportant. And so are the months following that day. When I would open my eyes, during my illness, I used to see his tall form leaning against the doorframe; he seemed to be afraid to enter.

He made himself inseparable from Father; there he was at my sisters' weddings and at Mother's and Nana's deaths.

But the shadow of the angel on my window was lost to me forever, as were Barrancas Square, the park, and the summerhouse among the wisteria vines.

I had become an inhabitant of the wasteland he had opened to me the night of the duel. I went out of the house in the morning and did not return until evening. I wandered through the city until I was lost in the most miserable and remote quarters of it. . . . But always when I turned a corner there he was waiting for me. I scarcely know whether he is alive or dead. Neither do I know whether or not we are both phantoms; perhaps we both died that night—he in the park, I on the terrace of the angel.

I can go out now; they're waiting for me.

